K

MANHUNT

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AUGUST, 1956
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A Literary Bombshell

KEY WITNESS

by FRANK KANE

EVERY STORY NEW!

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AUGUST, 1956

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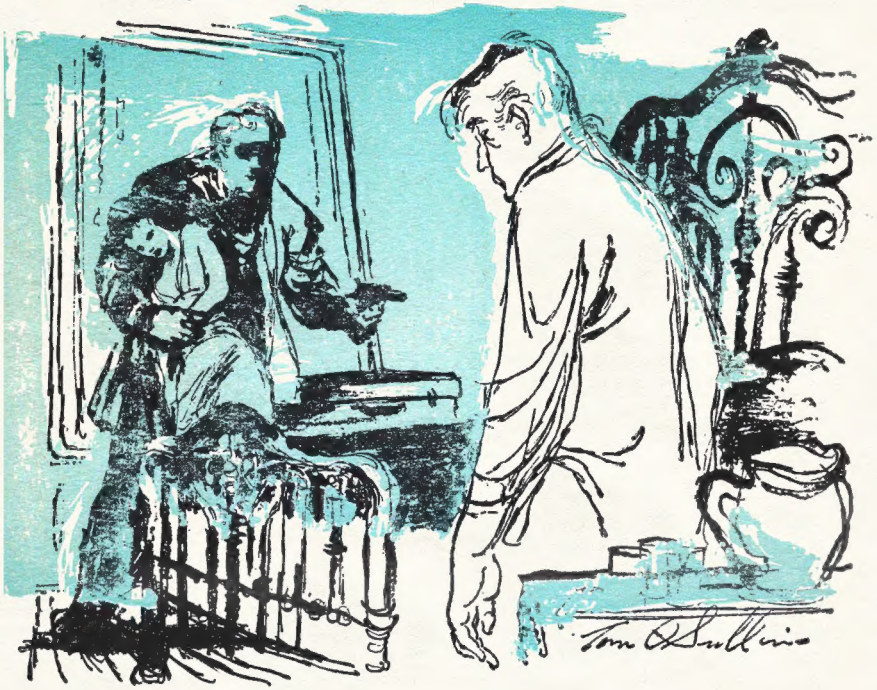
Cop Killer

BY DAN SONTUP

Hurt a cop and you die. That's how it was in Sgt. Baxter's book and no Academy Wonder was going to change it.



HE WAS alone in the squad room when I came in, sitting at a table all by himself. He was a big man, big all over, even to the size of the brown fedora perched on the back of his head. The table was a large one, but he seemed to tower over it even from his sitting position. In his massive hands, he held the service revolver, the gun looking puny next to the thick, heavy fingers. He kept turning the gun over and over in his hands, staring at it as he hefted it from one hand to the other.

I walked over and stood beside him, but he didn't look up.

"Sergeant Baxter?" I said.

He waited a moment and then glanced up at me, his gray eyes staring steadily into mine.

"Yeah," he said.

"I'm Detective Arnold," I told him. "Lou Arnold. I've been assigned to work with you." I held out my hand to him, but he ignored it and motioned across the table with his gun.

"I know. Sit down."

I sat down opposite him and watched him toy with the revolver. He kept turning it over and over in his hands, pressing the safety catch on and off several times. A good cop doesn't play with a gun like that, and it was making me nervous. The barrel never pointed at me, but I still didn't like it. He must have sensed this because he stopped for a moment and looked at me and said, "I know how to handle a gun, Arnold."

I didn't answer him because there was nothing I could say. He did hold the gun like a man who had grown up with one in his hands, but that didn't make me feel any better about it.

"So you're my new partner," he said finally.

"Yes."

"You know what case we're on now?"

"Yes."

"You been reading the reports?"

"I have."

"You heard all about it? You seen all the details in the papers?"

I nodded my head.

"You ever go after a cop killer before, Arnold?"

"The boy didn't kill a cop," I said.

Baxter looked up at me quickly, his heavy eyebrows rising in mock surprise. "Oh. He didn't? Then what did he do?"

"He pulled a knife on your partner and stabbed him—but he didn't kill him. He's going to live. The doctors say he'll be all right in a few weeks."

Baxter kept staring at me. "Look, Arnold," he said. "There's something you got to learn. When a punk pulls a knife or a gun on a cop and uses it, then, as far as anyone is concerned, he's out to kill—to kill a cop. It doesn't matter that he didn't get to do it. All that counts is that he tried. That makes him a cop killer in my book."

"We're splitting hairs," I said.

His lips tightened into a thin line, and he said, "Been on the force long, Arnold?"

"Three years, two of them walking a beat, the last year as a detective."

"Ever killed a punk?"

"No. I never had to use my gun once."

He smiled then, his lips curling back over even teeth, but the smile never even caused the corners of his eyes to crinkle. "Well, I have," he said. "I've been a cop for 22 years, and I worked 17 of them with my partner, Pete. I've killed

8 men in the line of duty, and Pete got 5. We were a good team."

"You'll still be one," I said. "As soon as he gets out of the hospital."

Baxter shook his head. "No. Not any more. Pete told me he's through. He's going to put in for his pension. He's had it."

"That's too bad," I said, "but he's got a right to his own choice."

Baxter grunted. "You're an Academy man, aren't you?"

"Yes, I graduated from the Police Academy."

He smiled again. "When Pete and I started on the force, they didn't have an Academy."

"That was a long time ago."

"We learned police work the hard way, the right way. They didn't turn out any soft cops in those days."

I shrugged my shoulders.

"It looks like I'm stuck with you, Arnold," he said, "so you might as well know I'm a real old-time cop. I look like one, I think like one, and I work like one."

"If you don't want me for a partner," I said, "you can always ask to have me transferred."

"Wouldn't help, Arnold. I'd only get another Academy boy."

I shrugged my shoulders again.

"You know the man you're replacing, Arnold? You ever met Pete?"

"I know him."

"Then you know what kind of a cop he was. We both worked together real well."

"I'm sorry you couldn't have kept on," I said.

He glanced at me sharply, but the sarcasm in my voice hadn't been strong enough to get through to him. He shook his head. "Maybe it's just as well, though."

"How's that?"

"Pete was slipping. He was getting careless, and now that he gets one little knife stuck in him he's ready to quit."

"The way I heard it, he wasn't careless. The kid just took him by surprise."

"Were you there, Arnold? Did you see what happened?"

"No."

"Well, I was. I was right there with him. We'd gone up to check this punk on a robbery down in the jewelry district. This Eddie Wilkins had already done time for a similar case, so he looked like a good bet."

He still had the gun in his hands, and he stopped and looked at it for a moment before going on. "Wilkins had his dame with him, a little squirt of a girl, and he tried to look big in front of her. He started to hand out some guff to us. Pete and I went to work on him, and that's when the kid pulled a kitchen knife out of the drawer and stuck it into Pete's stomach. I made a grab for him, but he kicked his way clear, and then he and the girl lammed out of there before I could get to my feet again."

He sighed and fondled the gun. "I started after them, but Pete groaned just then and I stopped to help him. He was all right, just wounded badly. But he hadn't handled it right at all. That kid never should have gotten close enough to him to use the knife. Pete should have blasted him right on the spot. He slipped up pretty badly on that one."

"I don't know about that," I said.

"What do you mean?"

"They got away from you, too, didn't they?"

Baxter glared at me. He snapped the safety again on the gun and then put it in its holster on his belt. "I don't think I'm gonna like you, Arnold," he said evenly.

I started to tell him the feeling was mutual, but I never got the words out. I heard the door open in back of me, and Baxter half rose in his chair, his eyes growing suddenly hard.

I turned around, and there was a uniformed officer in the doorway holding a girl by the arm.

"She wants to see you, Sergeant Baxter," the officer said.

Baxter sat down again and smiled that special smile of his. "Okay," he said. "Leave her here and wait outside."

The officer nodded and walked out and closed the door behind him, and Baxter and I sat there and looked at the girl.

She was small and tiny, but with the figure of a mature woman. I'd guess her age at eighteen to twenty, but with that kind you never could tell. She wore her black hair long, hanging down below her shoulders, and that always makes a woman look younger. She had hardly any make-up on her face, and the little bit of lipstick she did have on seemed even redder against the paleness of her face.

She didn't move, and Baxter finally broke the silence. "Arnold," he said, and his voice was heavy with sarcasm, "I'd like to introduce Dolores Wilkins. She's Eddie Wilkins' dame."

"I'm his wife, Sergeant," she said softly. "You know that."

Baxter grunted.

"That officer—Pete—is he all right?" she said, her voice even softer now.

Baxter grunted again, but didn't answer her.

She turned to me. "Is he all right? Please tell me."

"He's okay," I said. "He'll live."

The girl sighed, and Baxter stood up and pushed back his chair and walked over to her. It was almost ludicrous the way he towered over her as she looked up at him.

"All right," he said. "You've got your answer. Now, you're going to tell me a few things."

The girl waited, and Baxter said, "Where's the punk hiding out?"

She straightened up just a bit and said, "Eddie's in a hotel room now."

"Where?"

"I'll take you to him."

Baxter grinned. "You turning him in, sister? You getting tired of the punk?"

"Eddie's giving himself up," she said calmly. "He sent me to tell you that."

"Well, now isn't that nice," Baxter said. "Isn't that real generous of him. Tell me, why is he being so noble?"

"Eddie's not a killer, Sergeant. He made a mistake once and got sent to prison for it. But he's not a criminal, and you know it."

"He's a lousy cop killer," Baxter growled. "Where's he hiding out?"

"In a hotel. He'll give himself up, Sergeant, but he told me to tell you he won't do it if you make the arrest. You can come along, but Eddie will only give himself up to someone else."

Baxter smiled. "I don't make deals with cop killers, sisters. Where's he staying?"

"He won't do it, Sergeant. Not if you try to take him."

Baxter looked at her for a moment, his eyes never leaving her face. "Okay," he said finally. "Arnold can make the arrest, but I'm coming along. That's as far as I'll go in making a deal. But you better make sure he doesn't try to pull anything fancy, or he'll never leave the place alive."

The girl looked at me, and I nodded. "All right," she said "I'll take you to him."

"Nothing doing," Baxter said. "You tell us where he is now."

She looked at me again, and I said, "You'll have to tell us. We're not going there alone, and we're not going to follow you blindly."

She sighed. "He's at the Central Hotel. Room 404. But he won't give himself up unless I'm there with him."

Baxter grabbed for the phone and barked orders into it. Within seconds he'd set up everything for a police cordon around the block where the hotel was situated and had given instructions to clear all the guests from the fourth floor. Then, before he hung up the phone, he looked at the girl and gave one more order: "Nobody's to do anything until we get there. Just clear the place out, but don't try to take him. I'll handle the whole thing."

He put the phone back in its cradle and looked at the girl and then at me and then back to the girl.

"Let's go," he said. "Let's go get our little cop killer."

The girl rode between us on the front seat of the squad car, and we made quick time getting to the hotel. The entire block had been roped off, and the policemen made a path for the car through the crowd that jammed the road.

Baxter got out of the car, pull-

ing the girl out after him. "He still up there?" he asked one of the policemen.

The officer nodded. "He's in the room, but he says he'll kill anyone that comes in to take him until he sees his wife. He'll give himself up only when she's there."

Baxter grunted and said "C'mon," and held on to the girl's arm and started across the street with her toward the hotel entrance. I followed behind them.

Once inside, another policeman directed us to the elevator and rode up to the fourth floor with us. "You can go in the adjoining room," the officer said. "It's got a door that connects with his room, but he's got it locked from the other side. We've got a set of pass keys in the room."

Baxter nodded and the elevator stopped, and we all hurried down the hall. At room 403, the policeman directed us inside, and there was another officer in the room, his gun drawn, facing a closed door on the far wall.

"Okay," Baxter said. "Leave me the pass keys and wait outside."

The officer handed him the keys, holstered his gun and walked out. When the door had closed behind him, Baxter put the keys down on the table, walked over to the wall next to the locked door, and waited there. I took the girl by the arm and led her over to a corner.

"Wilkins!" Baxter shouted. "Can you hear me?"

There was no answer.

"Unlock this door and come out with your hands up, Wilkins," Baxter yelled. "And do it now."

There was still no answer.

The girl broke away from my grasp and ran across the room and up to the door. She raised a tiny fist and pounded on the door and shouted, "Eddie! Eddie, it's me. It's all right."

Baxter and I stood where we were. Finally, there was a muffled voice from the other side of the door, "Dolores?"

"Yes, Eddie," she said. "It's all right. The policeman didn't die. Please come out now."

"Is that Sergeant Baxter there with you?" he asked.

"Yes, he is."

"Tell him to get out."

Baxter shook his head. "Nothing doing," he growled.

"He won't go, Eddie!" she shouted.

"Then I'm not coming out."

Baxter, from his position next to the door, suddenly reached out his arm and grabbed the girl around the waist and pulled her away from in front of the door. He held her tightly against his massive body, and when he spoke, his voice was hard. "Okay. That's enough. We're through fooling around now." He gave the girl a shove and sent her staggering across the room to me. I grabbed hold of her and held on while she struggled in my grip.

Baxter stayed pressed against the wall. "Wilkins, I'm giving you one more chance!" he shouted. "Come out now, or I'll come in and get you."

"Don't try it, Sergeant. I've got a gun now. You'll get it right in the gut the minute you walk through that door."

Baxter licked his lips and looked over at me. "Hold on to her, Arnold," he said. "Don't let her get near this door again."

The girl squirmed in my grip, but I held on to her. "You can't do it," she said. "You promised you wouldn't make the arrest."

"Well, I'm going to, sister. What are you going to do about that?"

"But you promised."

"You don't have to keep a promise to a cop killer—or to his wife."

"He's not that!" she shouted at him. "You know he isn't a killer!"

"Oh, no?" Baxter said. "Don't kid me, sister. I was there."

"Yes—and you and that other policeman provoked him into using the knife. You forced him to do it."

Baxter grinned. "We did? How?"

The girl bit her lip and was silent.

"C'mon, tell us," Baxter said. "I'm sure Arnold will be interested in hearing this."

"You know what you did," she said softly.

"What?" said Baxter. "What did we do?" His voice was almost as low as the girl's, and there was a new and a more deadly quality in it that I'd not heard before.

"You held Eddie while your partner roughed me up. You know you did that."

"We did?"

"Yes. Your partner handled me. He—he put his hands on me." She shuddered. "It was horrible. You knew Eddie wouldn't stand for that. That's why he grabbed the knife."

Baxter shrugged. "That was a big mistake for him."

"Why did you do it?" she said. "Why? Did you enjoy doing something like that? Was it a lot of fun for both of you?"

Baxter smiled. "Maybe. Pete and I are bachelors." His smile spread, but still not to his eyes. "And maybe we wanted to get the punk mad enough to talk. Pete told me he was having a good time until your damn husband stuck the knife in him."

The girl had quit struggling in my arms now, but her breath was coming heavy. "Do you blame him for doing that? Wouldn't you have done the same to protect your own wife?"

"I told you I'm not married," Baxter said drily.

The girl twisted around in my grasp until she was facing me. "Are you going to let him break his promise? I thought you were the one who was going to arrest my husband? You promised."

I looked at her and then at Baxter. He was still smiling. "He's in charge," I said.

The girl laughed bitterly. "You cops are all alike."

"That's enough of that," I said.

It wasn't enough for her, though. "You've got me now, officer. Maybe you'd like to do what they did, too? Why don't you? You cops are all alike. Go ahead. What are you waiting for?"

"Be quiet," I told her.

There was a knock on the outside door. "You all right in there, Sergeant?" a voice asked.

"Yeah," Baxter shouted. "Stay out. I'll handle this."

He turned back to the girl. "Look, sister," he said, "I'm through fooling around. No one else is going to take him but me. I got a special way of handling punks who try to kill cops. So don't give me any more malarkey about promises."

He stepped away from the wall, being careful not to get in line with the locked door and walked over to the table and picked up the pass keys. Then he went back to his position by the wall, stretched out his hand and inserted a key in the lock. He turned it slowly, took the key out of the lock, and then threw the bunch of keys on the floor.

There was no sound from the other room.

"Wilkins!" Baxter shouted. "I'm gonna open the door!"

There was still no sound, and Baxter reached over and touched the knob. He turned it slowly, keeping his body pressed against the wall.

The knob turned silently, and all I could hear was the girl's loud breathing while I held her tightly.

Baxter gave a sudden yank, and the door flew open.

I could see into the other room —a bed, a chair and part of a chest of drawers against the wall. But no Wilkins.

Then his voice came through, probably from behind the chair the way it sounded. "Don't come in, copper. Don't set one foot inside this room."

"Throw out your gun," Baxter said, "and come on out of there. Right now."

There was no answer for a while, and then Wilkins' voice came out again, a note of real desperation in it now. "Don't come in. I won't give myself up to you. Not to you."

Baxter waited a moment and then made a sudden lunge past the open door and over to the corner where I was holding the girl.

There was no sound or movement from the other room.

"Let's send down for tear gas," I whispered in Baxter's ear, still holding on to the girl.

He looked at me, and his lip curled up over his teeth, and he smiled and took my hands off the girl.

"That's the hard way," he said. "I know an easier one—and it's a lot more fun."

He took a firm grip on the girl's arms and said, "I think I'll finish what Pete started."

The girl gave a little gasp, not loud enough to carry to the other room, but she let out a real scream when Baxter's big hand suddenly closed over the front of her dress. He pulled, and most of the top of the dress came away as though it were made of paper.

I saw Wilkins' head suddenly pop up over the top of the chair in the other room. "Dolores!" he yelled.

I drew my gun, but Baxter, still holding the girl, said, "Take it easy, Arnold. He won't shoot while we've got his chippie in the line of fire."

Wilkins' voice came from in back of the chair in an almost agonizing yell. "Keep your hands off her!"

Baxter laughed and reached around the girl with his free hand again. I couldn't see what he was doing, but she struggled and squirmed and her face grew red.

Baxter kept on laughing, and more of the girl's dress tore away, and then she screamed again. She almost got away from Baxter, but he pulled her back to him again. He was starting to breathe heavily now, and the girl began to sob.

"Please," she said. "Please—don't do that. Please stop."

Baxter didn't stop and the girl's sobs grew louder.

Wilkins, finally, stood up from in back of the chair and stepped out into the open. "All right," he said from the other room, "you win. Leave her alone. Let her go. I'll give myself up."

"Throw out your gun," Baxter said, still holding on to the girl.

"I haven't got any. I was only bluffing."

Wilkins started walking toward us, and I raised my gun. He moved with his arms hanging at his side and when he was through the doorway, and just a few feet away from us, Baxter gave the girl a sudden shove and she went stumbling across the floor to fall at the feet of her husband. What little there was left of her dress rode up above her knees, and she lay there like a bundle of torn rags on the floor.

Wilkins knelt down beside her and touched her gently and then helped her to her feet. She stood leaning against him for a moment and then swayed erect, but she wouldn't look at him or at Baxter or myself. She kept her eyes on the floor.

Wilkins looked at her and then at us. Baxter had flipped back his jacket and was reaching for his cuffs when the kid said, "You lousy cop. You had to maul her to get me. You had to do that to her, didn't you? Just like your partner did. I'm not sorry I knifed him.

I wish I could do the same to you." His voice was low, filled with defeat and bitterness, and he took a threatening step forward.

Baxter sprang into action. The hand that had been reaching for the cuffs suddenly switched to the holster. It was the fastest draw I've ever seen a cop make. It was the draw of a man who likes the feel of a gun in his hands. The revolver was out of the holster and pointed at Wilkins even before he had finished the first step.

There was a split second while he looked at the gun, and then Baxter's finger tightened on the trigger, and the gun roared and jumped in his hands.

Wilkins spun around with the force of the impact of the bullet and rolled on the floor and finally came to rest on his back.

The girl screamed terrifyingly loud in my ear. I saw Baxter calmly holstering his gun as he looked down at the red stain spreading on the upper part of Wilkins' shirt.

I still held on to my gun and went over to Wilkins and kneeled down beside him. He seemed to be breathing, but I couldn't be sure. I bent over and put my ear to his chest.

There was a sudden, slamming pain in my wrist. It was the hand in which I held my gun. The girl had brought her spiked heel down hard, stooped quickly and grabbed the gun from my limp fingers.

She stepped away and held it in front of her as I scrambled to my feet.

"Put it down," I said. "Don't be foolish."

A knocking started on the outside door. "Sergeant," came the policeman's voice from out in the hall, "is everything all right? Can we come in now?"

"Tell him to stay out," the girl said.

I hesitated, then said, "Not yet. Don't come in."

She stood there in her torn dress, holding the gun pointed at Baxter, while he stayed rooted to the spot. She let her eyes flick momentarily to Wilkins lying on the floor, and then her glance went right back to Baxter.

"Is my husband dead?" she asked.

Baxter didn't answer her, so I said, "We don't know. I didn't have a chance to check."

"Look at him," she said, never taking her eyes off Baxter. "Find out."

I went over to Wilkins and kneeled down again. Even before I put my ear to his chest this time, I knew what the answer would be. A cop soon learns to know what a dead body looks like. I checked, though, just to make sure. There was no heartbeat. I straightened up and got to my feet.

"Well?" she said, and there was a note of resignation in her voice as though she already knew.

"He's dead."

"Then so is Sergeant Baxter," she said.

Baxter started forward, stopped, his face starting to turn pale.

"Give me the gun," I said to her. "Don't do anything foolish."

She ignored me and raised the gun a little higher.

Baxter began to wilt. "I didn't mean to kill him," he said, his voice hoarse and cracking. "I thought he was—was going for a knife and—"

"He wasn't even reaching for anything," the girl said. "His hands weren't even moving. And you killed him."

"Hold on, now," Baxter said. "I didn't mean—"

He never finished the sentence. I saw her raise the gun until he was looking straight down the barrel, and, as the fear leaped into his eyes and his face turned even paler, her finger started to tighten on the trigger.

"That's when I made my move. But before I could reach her, she fired. The roar of the gun seemed even louder this time, and the heavy revolver bucked itself right out of her hand and fell to the floor.

There was no need to go to Baxter. She'd got him right between the eyes.

For a moment, there was silence in the room, then I walked over and took her by the arm and led her to the door. I opened the door, and the uniformed policeman came in, his eyes taking in the whole scene at a glance.

"Both of them," the policeman said aghast.

I nodded.

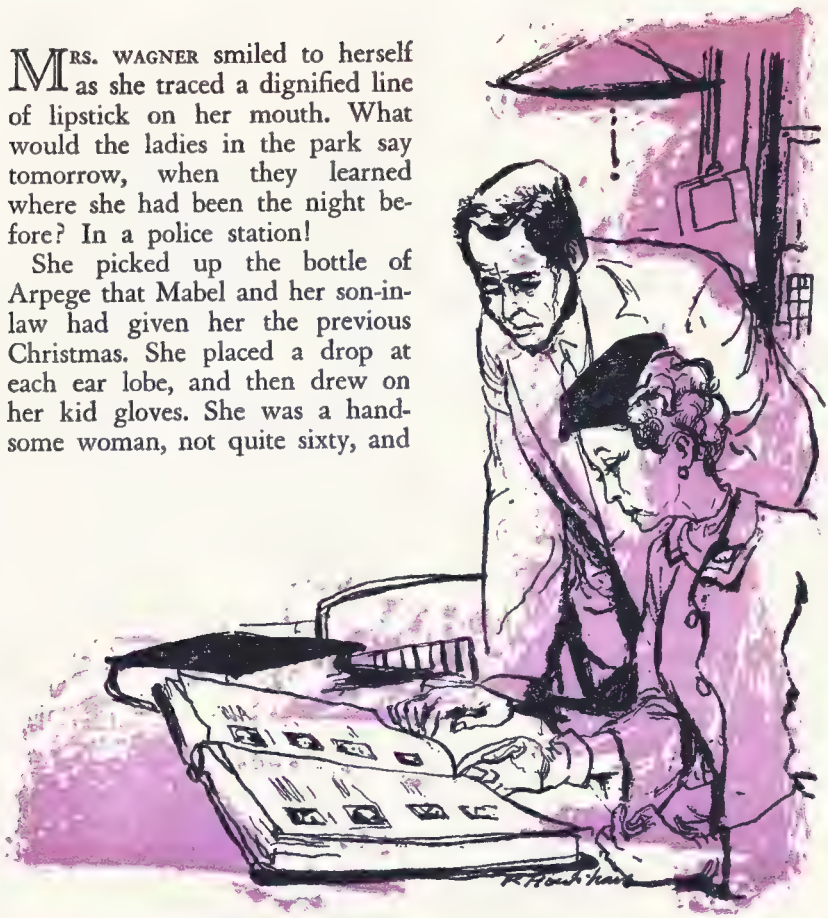
"He got Pete and now Baxter."

It took me a second to realize how he was taking it. I was willing to let it go the way he saw it. "Yeah," I said.

The girl looked at me, her eyes widening, unsure. "Come along," I told her, and took her arm. "I'll see you get home all right."

MRS. WAGNER smiled to herself as she traced a dignified line of lipstick on her mouth. What would the ladies in the park say tomorrow, when they learned where she had been the night before? In a police station!

She picked up the bottle of Arpege that Mabel and her son-in-law had given her the previous Christmas. She placed a drop at each ear lobe, and then drew on her kid gloves. She was a handsome woman, not quite sixty, and



The Man with Two Faces

BY HENRY SLESAR

All she felt now, on her way to identify her attacker, was an unfamiliar but pleasant excitement. Soon it would be over . . .

careful makeup concealed the purplish bruise on her left cheek. A small, navy-blue hat, a silver pin on the lapel of her suit, a few whisks of the clothes-brush on her shoulder, and she was ready.

She went into the living room. Mabel was reading a magazine, and her husband Leo had his darkly-handsome face buried in the evening newspaper.

"Well? How do I look?"

Mabel's lips tightened. "Oh, Mother. You'd think it was a party or something."

Mrs. Wagner shrugged carelessly, but she was disappointed. All the shock and horror of the attack two nights before had left her, and she felt now only an unfamiliar but pleasant kind of excitement.

"You look fine," Leo muttered. "Too good for a dirty old station house."

"I still think you're making a mistake," said Mabel. She lit a cigarette with a nervous movement. "Honestly, they'll get you so confused when you see those photographs—"

"I'd know that man's face *anywhere,*" her mother said emphatically. "I got a perfectly good look, and if I can help the police find him, and maybe get my purse back—"

Leo sniggered. "Fat chance," he said. "You can bet he threw away the purse. How much money was in it, anyway? Nine dollars and change! Seems like a big waste of time to me."

Mrs. Wagner felt deflated. Her stoutish figure sagged inside the trim lines of the tailored suit, and the bruise on her cheek suddenly throbbed for the first time that day. It made sense, of course. So much fuss for nine dollars and a leather purse . . .

"You're sure you don't want me to come along?" Mabel looked worried. "After all, you've had quite a shock, Mother. I really think it's too soon for you to go out."

"I'm all right," Mrs. Wagner said, in a flat voice. "I might as well get it over with." She hesitated. "You don't think I have on too much rouge?"

"No, you look fine."

"All right then. I'll be home in time for supper. Can I bring you back something?"

"I'm going shopping soon," Mabel said. She looked over at her husband. "Leo, go get Mother a cab."

Leo's face fell, but he started from his chair. Mrs. Wagner said quickly, "Please don't bother. I'm really fine. Honestly."

"You're absolutely sure?"

"Yes. I can take care of myself."

"All right. But be sure you get home before dark. One mugging is enough for anybody."

Mrs. Wagner looked pained. "Please, Mabel. Don't talk like that. You know I hate that word."

Mabel got up and touched her mother on the arm. She pecked her cheek lightly. "Okay. Be careful, and don't let them bully you." She snapped a look at her husband. "Leo!"

"What? Oh, yeah. Goodbye, Mother." Then he went back to his newspaper.

It was the first time in her life that Mrs. Wagner had ever entered a police station, and she climbed the stone stairs almost furtively, hoping that no one was watching. The officer at the front desk was polite. She was told to wait, and took a seat on the only bench in the room, where she was forced to rub her good woolen elbows against some very unsavory characters indeed. Finally, that nice lieutenant—was it Meadows? —came out to greet her, and ushered her into a quiet, business-like office in the rear of the station.

"Sit down, Mrs. Wagner," he invited. "I hope you remember me. Lieutenant Meade."

"Meade. Oh, yes, of course," Mrs. Wagner said.

"You must be feeling better," he smiled. "You look well."

"Yes. I'm fine. I suppose it was just shock. He—he didn't really hurt me very much. You remember what I told you. He came out of this doorway, and grabbed at my purse. Frankly, I would just as soon let him take it, but it was so entangled by my umbrella—"

"I know," the lieutenant said. "He must have gotten panicky."

"I suppose we both did," Mrs. Wagner admitted. "He finally got the purse away from me, and in the struggle, he must have hit me with it—" She touched her cheek lightly with her gloved fingers. "I hit him with the handle of the umbrella. Quite accidentally. But I'm sure he's got a swollen jaw this week." She laughed uncertainly.

"But you saw his face," the lieutenant said.

"Yes. I'm sure I'd recognize it again."

Meade slapped his thigh. "Fine," he said cheerfully. "It's not often we get good witnesses like you, Mrs. Wagner." He settled into the wooden swivel chair and prepared pencil and pad in front of him. "Just a few questions more and we can look at some photographs."

"All right," the woman said.

"I have all the basic statistics. I was just wondering about yourself, Mrs. Wagner. Did you say you live alone?"

"No. I live with my daughter and her husband."

"I see. But the apartment is registered under your name?"

"Well, it's been my apartment for years," Mrs. Wagner explained. "In fact, I've had it since my husband was alive, and since Mabel—that's my daughter—was born. They've been living with me since —oh, I suppose it's a year now, since they got back from Califor-

nia." She paused, and was suddenly conscious of her own perfume. Now it seemed uncomfortably out of place. "My daughter went to California about seven years ago. She had a job there with one of the film companies. That's where she met Leo, her husband."

"Had you known—er, Leo—before?"

"No. I actually met him for the first time last year, when they returned to New York. He had some kind of job offer here. Actually, it hasn't worked out too well, so they've been staying with me until things improved for him."

"I see." The lieutenant scratched something on the pad, and then got to his feet. "Well, no use delaying the main attraction, Mrs. Wagner," he said pleasantly. "We'll go into the records room now, and you can look over our family albums. I hope they don't give you nightmares."

She laughed. "I don't think so."

"That's the spirit. We'll show you pictures of various types of criminals we believe to be operating in the east. Some of them will be specialists in the kind of work our friend indulges in, but there'll be others too. You never know what will turn up. Ready?"

"I'm ready," Mrs. Wagner said.

After two hours, her eyes burned and her head ached, and the bruise on her left cheek was drumming with remembered pain.

She examined the grim photographic likenesses of muggers, hold-up men, purse snatchers, rapists, armed robbers, burglars, dope fiends. There was even a more respectable file for her perusal: forgers, counterfeiters, embezzlers, con artists. There was a file that filled her with horror and loathing when she realized its common denominator: perverts, sex maniacs, the depraved in all their varieties. She grew sick at the sight of sometimes sweet and innocent young faces whose recorded deeds were incredibly lengthy and violent. She saw faces, faces, faces—until the images blurred and she leaned back exhausted.

"I'm sorry," she said to the lieutenant, who was watching her carefully. "I just can't seem to find the man."

"We don't expect miracles," the detective said. "For one thing, he may never have been mugged—photographed. He may be a newcomer to the business. But if I could prevail on your good nature for another ten minutes, just to make sure we haven't missed anything—"

He produced still another book.

"This'll be the last," he promised.

She smiled wanly. "Of course," she said.

Mrs. Wagner turned the pages. The first six pages were unfamiliar. When she reached the seventh, she stopped.

"Something?" said the lieutenant.

She stared at the side-by-side photographs; the youngish, dark man with unshaven cheeks, the sharp nose and the full lips, the long lashes and the sleek black hair. The handsome, cynical profile.

"Recognize something, Mrs. Wagner?"

She didn't hear the question. Her eyes went to the bottom of the page, looking for words. She found them, and they read: *Name: Will Draves, alias Willie the Weeper, alias Louis Jones. Born: San Francisco, California,* 1925. *Wanted for Grand Larceny, Fresno, California. Wanted for Armed Robbery, Burbank, California. Wanted for—*

"Mrs. Wagner!"

She raised her head, startled. "Yes?"

"Is that the man?"

She looked at the detective blankly. "No. No," she said loudly. "I told you. The man was fair. Sort of dirty blond. He didn't look like this—this man at all." She flipped the page hurriedly.

Lieutenant Meade met her eyes sharply, and then sighed. "Finish up," he said, with a touch of impatience in his voice. "There aren't many more to look at, Mrs. Wagner."

She finished the book, hardly seeing the remaining portraits of the hunted and despairing men who filled the pages.

"I'm sorry," she said distantly, as she closed the book. "I guess I can't find our man, lieutenant."

"That's all right, Mrs. Wagner. You did what you could. And we appreciate your cooperation."

"Yes." She drew on her gloves, and started towards the door. "Thank you, lieutenant," she said.

"Thank you, Mrs. Wagner," he said. "We'll be in touch with you if anything turns up."

She went down the stone steps slowly. She waved a taxi to a halt at the corner, and when she climbed inside a sudden chill touched her spine at the thought of coming home.

Mabel's husband left the house about ten the next morning. He had an "appointment" with a "broker" about a "transaction." Mabel bid him goodbye with a perfunctory kiss at the door, and then snuggled into the corner of the living room sofa with a bottle of nail polish. Mrs. Wagner came out, looking haggard after a restless night, and sat down beside her.

"Mabel . . ." she began. Her daughter looked annoyed, but her face softened as she glanced up at her mother.

"You don't look well, Mother. Does your cheek hurt?"

"No, it's all right. I was just thinking about—Leo."

"Leo?" The girl examined her fingertips critically. "What about

him?" When her mother failed to reply, Mabel's face clouded. "You mean about his job, is that it?"

"I was just wondering. When you met him in California—what kind of work was he doing?"

"Mother, I've told you a hundred times! Leo was a stock broker. He was doing very well. For heaven's sake, where do you think we got our car? And my furs? It's just that things are different in the east—"

"Yes, I know dear; you told me. I'm not very good at understanding these things. I mean, I never really understood the kind of work your father did, either. He never talked about it enough for me to learn very much. He was an old-fashioned man, your father."

"Yes, Mother, I know."

"It's just so hard to *know* people, you understand. Their background and everything. Why, there were things I never knew about Harry until after he died . . ."

"Mother, Leo and I have been married now for almost six years. If you think there's anything I don't know about him by now—"

Mrs. Wagner clutched her hands together and rose from the sofa. She was handling this badly; she couldn't reveal her suspicion without creating a scene. And Mabel was so sensitive.

"I don't mean any harm, Mabel. You know I want you to be happy, more than anything. I like Leo; honestly, I do."

"Thanks," Mabel said dryly.

"I'm sure he's a very smart man," Mrs. Wagner said. "I realize that it isn't easy to adjust yourself to a new city and all—"

Mabel screwed the long-stemmed brush back into the bottle. "What are you driving at, Mother?"

"Nothing, dear, really. It's been wonderful for me having you here. God knows, there's room enough—"

"Do you want us to leave?"

Mrs. Wagner started. "No, of course not!"

Mabel slammed the bottle on the table. "Just say so if you do, Mother," she said, in a hard voice. Leo and I don't want to be a burden on you. We can live perfectly well in a small apartment someplace. Just say the word."

"Mabel . . ." Mrs. Wagner sat down again and put her arms around the girl's resisting shoulders. "Please don't misunderstand, darling. You're everything in my life now; you know that."

"I know, Mother."

"I guess it's just everything that's happened this week. I'm really not myself. Those awful pictures yesterday . . ."

The girl patted her hand. "You've got to try to forget it."

"I keep seeing those faces," Mrs. Wagner said. "Hundreds of them. So many young ones, good-looking boys. And those terrible crimes . . ."

"You want me to do your nails?"

"What?" Mrs. Wagner asked.

"Your nails. They're a sight, Mother. Let me do them for you. It's a new shade . . ."

Mrs. Wagner looked at her hands. They were trembling.

"All right," she sighed.

Mabel set to work. She became calmly absorbed in the process, and her mother studied her face as she stroked on the bright red lacquer.

"Don't you worry about Leo," her daughter said quietly. "Leo is all right. Leo made a lot of money in California. A lot of money."

At four in the afternoon, Mrs. Wagner reached a decision. She went into her bedroom, and lifted the extension telephone. She dialed the number of the 57th Street Precinct and waited anxiously until Lieutenant Meade picked up at the other end.

"Hello?"

"Lieutenant Meade?"

"Speaking. Who's this?"

"This is Mrs. Wagner. You remember. I came down yesterday to look at the photographs. For the purse-snatcher."

"Oh, yes. How are you, Mrs. Wagner? Feeling okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Is anything wrong? Did you remember something else?"

"No, nothing like that. It's just that I—that I wanted to talk to you about something."

"Just a second, Mrs. Wagner." There was a pause, and then the detective returned. "Go ahead, Mrs. Wagner."

"It's nothing I can say over the phone. I wonder if we could . . . well, meet someplace."

"Mm. Well, that's a little difficult for me right now, Mrs. Wagner. Why don't you come down to the station house again?"

The woman put her hand to her throat. "Frankly, I was hoping I wouldn't have to. It's really—nothing to do with the purse-snatcher. It's something else."

"I see. Well, I could send a patrolman to your home."

"Oh, no," she said quickly. "It's nothing like that. Perhaps I'd better come down there then."

"Anything you say, Mrs. Wagner."

"Will you be there the rest of the afternoon?"

"I'll be here until six. Maybe later. We don't keep very regular hours in the police department."

"All right, then. Suppose I come down now. I'll be there around four-thirty. Is that all right?"

"That's fine, Mrs. Wagner."

She hung up the telephone, and began to busy herself in preparation, before she had time to think over what she had done.

At the door of the apartment, she called out to her daughter.

"Mabel? I'm going shopping for awhile."

But Mabel, absorbed in the smooth passages of a current novel, didn't hear her. She left the house, closing the door quietly behind her.

Mrs. Wagner met Leo coming into the apartment building downstairs, his dark, handsome face ruddy with the March wind, his sleek black hair rumpled. He mumbled a greeting to her, and she replied in a low voice. Then she took a cab to the police station, and went up the stone steps for the second time in two days.

Lieutenant Meade watched her narrowly.

"William Draves? Is that the fellow you mean?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Wagner. "I think that was the name."

"I saw your double-take yesterday, when you were going through the files. I'll have one of our boys dig it out again." He pressed something on the desk, and a shirt-sleeved man came into the room. The detective told him what was wanted, and he left.

"It could be just a coincidence, of course," Mrs. Wagner said. "But when I saw the man's face—"

"Let's start from the beginning," Meade said. "Where did you see his face before?"

"Well . . ." Mrs. Wagner lowered her eyes to the floor. "Remember that I told you my daughter had worked in California? She was secretary to a film producer, who later went out of business. The first year she was there, she met this man. I forget his name now." She hesitated.

"Go on, Mrs. Wagner. Was this man Will Draves?"

"I'm not sure. She sent me a photograph once. Taken at Catalina Island, I think. The two of them together. He was rather tall, and dark. Quite nice-looking, I thought. Not a movie star or anything, but with a kind of—well, memorable face. A special sort of *look*, if you know what I mean."

"Of course," the detective said.

"When I saw the photograph yesterday . . . well, I guess I've never seen two men before who had that same sort of *look*. I'm not being very clear—"

"You're doing fine," Meade said. "And what became of this man?"

"I really don't know." Mrs. Wagner folded her hands. "I suppose she broke off with him when she met Leo. They were married in Fresno shortly after I got the photo. About six months."

"And you don't remember the man's name?"

"I suppose my daughter would. I haven't asked her, of course. You understand. I mean, she'd be very upset if she knew what kind of man she had been seeing. And after all, the issue is closed . . . if you know what I mean."

"Yes, I do," said the detective. "Of course, a photo taken so many years ago probably won't help us find Draves too easily. We know that he left California and came east. Just where is another question."

Mrs. Wagner wet her lips. "Yes," she said. "I understand."

The shirt-sleeved man entered the room and put the flat book in front of the lieutenant. He flipped through the pages and stopped at the seventh photograph.

"This the one?" he said.

"Yes. That's the man who looks like him, anyway." Mrs. Wagner looked at the picture, and then turned away.

"Do you have his photograph still, Mrs. Wagner? The Catalina one?"

"Yes." She dug into her purse, her old purse. "I have it here. It's not really too clear a picture—"

Lieutenant Meade took the print from her hand. It was about 4x4, a black-and-white glossy, and it showed a man and woman on a beach. The couple wore bathing suits. There was the blur of a misplaced thumb in the corner of the photograph.

"It's not easy to make him out," the detective said. "Your daughter is certainly a pretty girl."

"Thank you," Mrs. Wagner said. She watched the detective remove a square-shaped magnifying glass from his desk drawer. He put it over the photo and compared the features of the man with the police portraits in front of him.

"There's some resemblance, all right," he said. He looked thoughtful for a moment, and then excused himself. "I'll be back in a minute," he told her.

It was five minutes before he returned. Mrs. Wagner waited with her eyes shut, unwilling to look again at the portrait of William Draves. When the lieutenant reentered the room, he slammed the book shut and leaned back in his chair, regarding the woman.

"Have you—found out anything?" she asked.

"Nothing much, Mrs. Wagner. But I rather think you may be concerned over nothing."

"What do you mean?"

He smiled. "Well, I admit there's a resemblance in these photos. But a camera is a pretty tricky piece of work. Whoever said photographs don't lie didn't know what he was talking about. Why, I've seen pictures of people who looked like identical twins, until you put them side-by-side, in the flesh."

"Then you think that—"

"I think you've probably met up with another of those coincidences, Mrs. Wagner. This man your daughter knew in California—well, maybe he was Willie Draves, and maybe he was five other guys. I really wouldn't get upset about it."

Mrs. Wagner sighed with relief. "Thank heavens," she said. "You have no idea how worried I was."

"I could see you were. And you've had enough to worry about this week, eh, Mrs. Wagner?"

She smiled weakly. "I guess I have."

"And this—friend of your daughter. I guess you can tell me the truth about him now."

"What do you mean?"

He laughed engagingly. "I've been on the force for over twenty years, Mrs. Wagner. I've talked with lots of people about their fears and anxieties. It's hard for me to believe that you could be so concerned about a man your daughter knew briefly almost six years ago."

Her face sagged. "Of course," she said.

"Who is he really, Mrs. Wagner?"

"He's my son-in-law, Leo. I told you about him. I admit the resemblance startled me. But I should have realized that my daughter could never . . . could never love a man like *him*." She gestured towards the closed book.

Mabel was setting the table when Mrs. Wagner entered the apartment. Her hair was neatly set and combed, and she was wearing her good satin dress. Leo was in his usual place at the head of the table, well-shaved and brushed. They both smiled as she entered, and she returned the smile warmly.

"You're just in time, Mother," Mabel said.

She removed her coat. "Fine," she said. "My, you two look nice this evening. Going somewhere?"

"We thought we'd go downtown to a movie," Mabel said.

Mrs. Wagner came to the table. "Listen," she said suddenly. "I've got an idea. Suppose I call my friend Mrs. Buchalter at the ticket company. Maybe she'll have a couple of nice seats for a play. Would you like that?"

Mabel and Leo looked at each other. "That would be swell," her son-in-law said.

"It's a week night, after all," Mrs. Wagner said enthusiastically. "It shouldn't be very difficult. And Mrs. Buchalter always seems to have some nice seats left over. Why don't I call her?"

"There are some good musicals in town," Mabel said.

"Listen, I'll call her right now before it gets too late," Mrs. Wagner got up from the table.

"That's real swell of you," Leo said.

The woman went to the telephone, a happy feeling taking possession of her. She dialed the ticket broker's number, and waited while the bell jangled at the other end.

The front doorbell rang before Mrs. Buchalter answered. Mrs. Wagner put the receiver back in its cradle and opened the door.

The man in the doorway was Lieutenant Meade. Mrs. Wagner hardly recognized him, despite the fact that she had visited him only an hour before. When she did, she smiled with pleasure.

"Lieutenant Meade!" she said. "You've found the purse!" Her day seemed complete.

"Not exactly, Mrs. Wagner."

She backed up and he entered. The two patrolmen behind him followed, their faces alert, eyes appraising their surroundings.

"Is your son-in-law home?"

Mabel called out from the dining room. "Who is it, Mother?"

Mrs. Wagner clutched the collar of her dress. "Yes," she said. "Leo is home. Why? What's happened?"

"We did some more checking, Mrs. Wagner."

Leo himself came into the foyer, a napkin tied ludicrously around his neck, his jaws still moving over the food in his mouth. "What's going on?" he said. He stared at the police officers blankly. "What do you want?"

Lieutenant Meade nodded towards him. "Willie Draves, I'm placing you under arrest." He looked sadly towards the man's mother-in-law. "I'm sorry about this, Mrs. Wagner."

She looked at him, mouth open. "But you told me—"

Mabel came out to join them. Her hands clutched anxiously at the hem of her apron. "What is it?" she said. "Who are these people, Mother?"

"Mabel—" Mrs. Wagner reached out for her daughter's arm. Lieutenant Meade reached across them and separated them gently.

"You, too, Mrs. Draves," he said. "You'll have to come along with us."

"Mrs. Draves?" Mrs. Wagner seemed to stumble against some invisible obstacle. Her hand went out, and she righted herself against the wall of the foyer. "No; you're making a mistake," she said wildly. "She didn't know about him! Do you understand? She didn't know! I told you, lieutenant—I told you—"

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Wagner. Believe me." The detective looked pained. "She knows all about him, I'm afraid. They've been working together in California for some five years now. Then, when the trail got too hot on the coast, they beat it out of there and came east."

"No!" Mrs. Wagner shrieked. "You don't know what you're talking about! He's the one. He's the one I saw."

"I'm glad it was a *man* who took your purse, Mrs. Wagner," the detective said. It would have been terrible for you . . . to have run across *her* picture."

The man with the dirty blond hair looked quickly up and down the deserted street. Then he lifted the cover of the ash can and threw the brown leather purse inside. He walked away rapidly, rubbing his aching jaw.

"Nine bucks," he said disgustedly. "It wasn't worth the trouble . . ."

Gruber Corners by Nine

BY JOHN R. STARR

The host was a very congenial guy, until they got into his cellar . . .

EVERY TIME my aching feet hit the hostile pavement of U.S. 64, I said a few curse words for Bertram Moody. Every time I lifted a thumb at onrushing headlights, I worked his ancestors over. Occasionally I used a damn or so for myself, because I deserved what I was going through.

Moody had warned me often enough about getting drunk and missing the convoy. A dozen times he'd warned me, but he had always telegraphed the money I needed for

a train or bus to catch Moody's All-American Shows in the next town.

That morning, however, after I'd hauled myself out of a strange bed, blown a hung-over kiss at the strange woman still asleep there and dispatched the usual telegram to Gruber Corners, Tenn., the carnival's next stopover, I got a different kind of wire. "If you make it here in time for tonight's show, okay," the wire read. "If not, you're fired. Cordially, Bert."

I was surprised at first that Bert had reached the end of his rope. After I took a gander at the road map, I found out why he had picked Paris, Tenn., to abandon me in. Gruber Corners was a hundred miles south, one of the carney's longer jumps, and there was no main highway between it and Paris. It was joggle and backtrack, with segments of the route passing over no less than three U.S. highways.

I figure Bert would have fired me outright, only guys with my talent are hard to come by. I'd have quit when I got that wire, only carney owners who'll put up with habits like mine are harder to come by. He was giving me a chance. A hard chance, but he must have known I'd take it.

I blew the lone dime I had left from last night's round of Paris bistros on a cup of coffee. It was twelve-fifteen by the courthouse clock when I started the first leg of my penitent journey by parking myself under a sign which said, "JACKSON, 38 miles." Fourteen rides and five hours later, it was getting dark and I was legging it out of Selmer, on the home stretch.

A sign, some miles back, had announced that it was twenty-five miles to Gruber Corners. It was about twenty now, and I knew I'd never make it by nine o'clock if I had to walk it. And it was beginning to look like a ride was out of the question. No more than a dozen cars had passed me in an hour and they had all speeded up when they saw my thumb.

The feet kept hollering for a break, so I pulled off the concrete and stretched out on a grassy knoll. I got about two minutes rest before the whine of an approaching car sent me scurrying back to the road.

It was a heavy car, coming fast, with extremely bright headlights. I just made it, with time to straighten up and stick out my hand, when the car topped a rise and its lights splashed over me. The driver cut his engine immediately and screeched to a stop fifty yards past. I put the last of my strength into a gallop, overhauled the car and slid onto the foam-rubber seats of a 1956 Cadillac.

"Hi," I said to the big man driving. "Thanks. I was beginning to think nobody'd stop."

"We had a hitchhiker rob a guy on this road about a year ago," he said. "Makes you reluctant to pick anybody up."

"I can see that."

I eased back in the seat. He put his foot on the accelerator and put the lie to guys who say automatic transmissions rob a car of pickup. I saw that he was a heavy, rough-featured man who looked like he had once been an athlete and had never lost the condition of one.

"Going far?" I asked.

"How far you need to go?"

"A place called Gruber Corners."

"You in a big hurry?"

"Not particularly. Got to be there by nine. I'm with the carnival."

His eyebrow shot up. "Oh, this is something new. Carnival people hitchhiking to the job."

I told him about my habit of getting drunk and missing the convoy. He chuckled.

"They're not expecting you, then?"

"Well, I imagine Moody's got some pretty good bets on whether I make it or not."

"I'm going on into Gruber Corners, but I've got to stop by my place first. I'll be there well before nine. If you'd care to stop off with me, I'll be glad to take you on in."

"Say, that'll be fine," I said.

I leaned back against the cushion and closed my eyes. I needed a little rest if I was going to be sharp tonight. Just a little would do me. It was a good thing for the act that I could get by on a little, because that's as much as I usually got.

We went about ten miles and turned off on a secondary road. Two miles down that he cut off on gravel and shortly he turned into a concrete drive that led to a house bigger than I'd imagined existed in this part of the country. It was strictly New York suburban, two stories and stretching over half an acre. There was a high, wire-mesh fence extending out of eye range on both sides of the ornate gate that stopped fifty yards from the mansion. The big fellow took a flashlight from the glove compartment, aimed it at an electric eye in the stone column on the left and the gate glided open. It closed itself as soon as we had passed through.

A semicircular drive led to an imposing front entrance. My host escorted me into a parlor that could have housed the Olympic Games and waved me to a seat. He pulled on an old-fashioned bell rope that called forth a scared-looking old Negro who scampered to a portable bar and whipped up a couple of highballs.

Over the drinks we got around to the amenities. His name was Jason Hecht. That meant no more to me than Bill Evans meant to him. He took a seat opposite me in the cluster of chairs around the cold fireplace. He was looking me over closer than I like to be studied, but I didn't complain. It was his house and his liquor.

The whiskey burned down into my stomach, reminding me I hadn't eaten that day. I accepted

readily when he offered food. The steaks the Negro brought were medium rare and thick enough to use for catchers' mitts. I did my best to keep from looking like a glutton, but it wasn't easy. Hecht toyed with his steak like that kind of eating was habit with him.

I was finishing off my steak when he suddenly asked, "How much do you weigh, Evans?"

"200, 210, maybe," I replied around a chunk of steak. "Why?"

"That makes you about my size."

"Yeah, I'd say we were about the same size."

There were fresh drinks waiting when we finished eating. They didn't last long.

Time hurried on. I began fretting when the huge clock over the fireplace chimed 7:30, because Hecht seemed in no hurry to leave. He got wound up talking about his college football days and some professional boxing he'd done afterward. I was beginning to get bored and nervous, too. I was too damn close to the carnival to be philosophical about missing the act now.

"Did you?" Hecht asked.

I hadn't heard the question. "Did I what?" I asked.

"Did you follow the fights, say 10 years ago?"

"No, not much. I don't remember your name."

"Oh, I didn't fight under my own name. I kept my background hidden very carefully. It would have cost me the money I used to build this place, if my parents had ever found out I was a pugilist, as dad called them."

"What name did you use?" I asked because he expected me to.

"Shane," he said. "Ted Shane."

"Not Killer Shane!"

"Yes, that's what they called me."

I took a closer look at him. I'd seen pictures of Killer Shane, read a lot of articles about him in the sports magazines. Ever so often an editor would liven up a dead issue by rehashing the story of the boxer who had everything it took to be heavyweight champion except knowing when to stop. When he had a man helpless, the killer instinct seized him and it took referees, seconds and judges to pull him off. The first time he'd killed a man like that, he was suspended for six months. The second time he was barred from the ring for life. He disappeared after that. Ever so often, some punch drunk pug would claim he was Killer Shane, but a little checking revealed the lie. So this was what had happened to Killer Shane.

"Sure! I know you then. I know a dozen editors who'd give their eye teeth for a story about what happened to you."

"But you wouldn't tell them, would you, Evans?"

"Hell no. I figure a man's got a right to live as he pleases."

His eyes burned into mine. The hard brightness of them scared me.

I stood up. "Mr. Hecht," I said, "I've got to be getting on if I'm going to make the carney by nine."

"We've got plenty of time, Evans," he said.

The way he said that brought it all back—the emphasis he'd put on nobody expecting me, how he'd dismissed the Negro after the second round of drinks, how he'd done nothing since we'd been in the house to account for his pressing need to visit it before we went on into Gruber Corners.

"If it's all the same to you, I'll leg it if you're not ready to leave. I can't afford to be late."

"It isn't all the same to me," he said sharply, "and you can't afford to try to leave, either." He drew a .38 revolver from his coat pocket and leveled it at my breastbone.

"Sit down," he ordered.

I sat.

"What the hell is this?" I demanded.

"Just a little game I play, Evans," he said. "A very serious little game."

"What's that?"

"Ever fought for your life, Evans?"

"How do you mean?"

"I mean when it's kill or be killed."

"No, not like that. I've had some pretty rousing fights, but never that serious."

"What would you do if you were forced to fight for your life?"

The stuff I'd eaten churned like my stomach was a washing machine.

"I'd rather not."

His eyes blazed. "Christ, man, there's no other way to fight. Any other way is like playing tiddlywinks. Boxing is for babies. When a real man got into the game, they made rules against him. I could have been the champion. I could have killed anyone in the game with either hand, but they called me a killer and banned me from the ring. I had to find someplace else to fight."

I didn't like what I was beginning to understand, but the gun in his hand was stronger than any argument I could muster. He got up and motioned with the gun for me to do likewise. He pointed the way and I led him through a long hall, down a flight of steps and through a thick, steel door. We stood on a concrete ramp, looking down into a room about the size of a handball court. It had sheer walls and I saw no stairway leading down into it.

Hecht touched a button and a stairway slid out of the wall and descended to the floor. "Go down," he ordered. "Strip and put your clothes on the bottom step."

I started to protest but he waved the gun menacingly. His eyes were shining bright stars. I don't argue with crazy men when they're waving guns. I went down the stairs and did as he instructed.

When I was standing naked in

the far corner of the arena, he elevated the stairway, removed my clothes and tossed them aside. Then he laid down the pistol and stripped himself. From a case beside the door, he took two matched hunting knives. He lowered the stairway and came down it, walking lightly.

I said he was heavy, but there was no fat on him. His smooth, powerful muscles rippled as he walked down the steps, holding himself very erect, enjoying my amazed stare.

"Are you any good with a knife, Evans?" he asked.

I saw them then, hundreds of scars that covered his body. There were minor cuts, healed into thin white lines, and the scars of more serious wounds that still showed red in his tanned skin.

"I've used one now and then," I said trying to keep my voice calm.

He bent and slid one of the knives across the floor to me. I picked it up and weighed it.

"There are no rules to this game," he said. "You may use your weapon any way you see fit. If you kill me, there are the stairs. The keys are in the Cadillac. The Negro is almost blind. He could never give a description of you. You have nothing to fear—if you kill me."

"And if you kill me?"

"Why, I have nothing to fear either. No one knows you're here. It's doubtful if anyone at the carnival expects you. That makes us somewhat even."

"Even," I sneered. "Except that you've gone through this before and I. . ."

"Thirty-two times, to be exact. You are the thirty-third. Some have come close. You can see the scars."

He took a step toward me. I crouched and held the knife at ready. I hoped it was balanced. A chuckle started deep in his throat, growing in volume and intensity as he crouched and advanced on me, that wild light shining in his eyes.

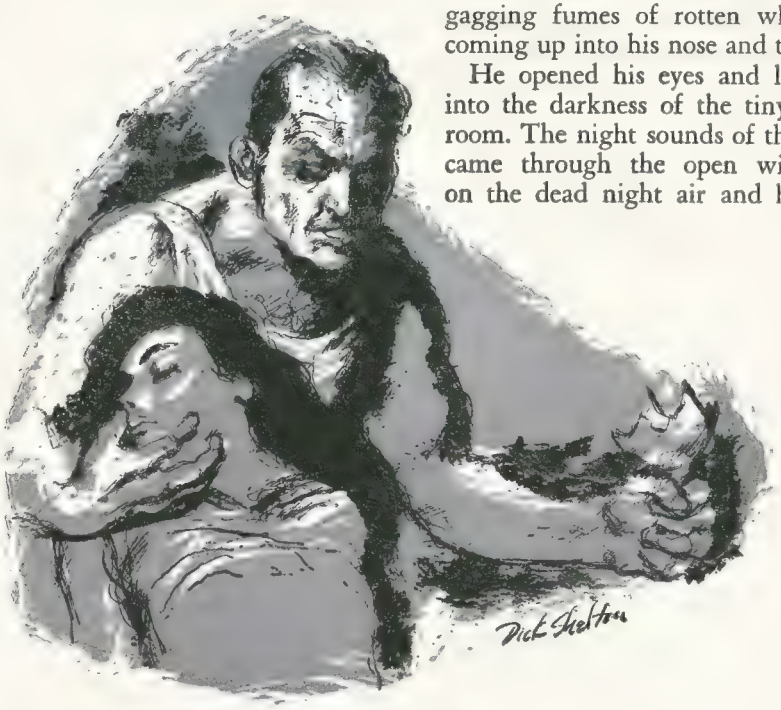
He was fifteen feet away when I let the knife go. It drove into his chest exactly where I aimed, driving upward just under the short ribs. He fell and lay still . . .

I rode the Cadillac hard, thanking the darkening sky that Hecht hadn't been an archer or a whip man. Hadn't he realized the law of averages would get him sooner or later, the dumb bastard? It could have been later, of course, if he'd just asked what I did in Moody's All-American Shows.

Seven Lousy Bucks

He didn't love her, didn't want her. But she was worth more than a pair of shoes.

BY C. L. SWEENEY, JR.



THE SOUND of the man being sick wakened him. He came out of his drink-drugged sleep slowly, painfully, gradually becoming aware of the dull throbbing ache at his temples, the stifling heat of the August night, the sick-sweet smell of the perspiration oozing from the pores of his flabby white body and soaking his underclothes and the sheet on which he lay, the gagging fumes of rotten whiskey coming up into his nose and throat.

He opened his eyes and looked into the darkness of the tiny bedroom. The night sounds of the city came through the open window on the dead night air and he lay

there and heard them, not moving, staring into the blackness, his mind groping back into focus. Somewhere in the block a baby was crying, an automobile horn rasped impatiently at a busy intersection, a man's voice was raised in violent argument, a girl giggled excitedly as she was pressed back into the shadows of a doorway.

And above them all he heard the sound of the man being sick. Violently, retchingly, disgustingly sick.

He buried his head in the damp pillow, pulling the edges up around his ears, trying to shut out the sound, feeling his own stomach begin to writhe and groan in sympathy.

God, it was bad enough having Clare bring these bastards up to the apartment, letting them make love to her in the next room, his room, his bed, while he sweltered in this damned hot box. Now even that wasn't enough. Now they had to get sick, too.

He raised himself on his elbows, then with considerable effort forced his heavy body up and around until he sat on the edge of the bed. Sitting up, his head ached even worse and nausea came over him in sickening waves, flooding his senses, like the sound of the man in the bathroom. He fought his stomach down and fumbled frantically about in the darkness until he found the bottle. He held it to his ear and shook it and nearly laughed aloud with relief as he heard the reassuring gurgle. His hands trembling almost uncontrollably, he unscrewed the cap and pushed the bottle to his lips. Throwing his head back, he felt the stuff burn past his throat to his stomach, then the familiar warm, steadying glow. He shook his head in appreciation, wiping the back of his hand across his thick lips and the stubble of beard on his chin.

That was the ticket. He felt better. Not good, but better. He shook the bottle and there was a faint slopping. Good. Still some left. He'd need it worse later. He always needed the next one worse.

The man had stopped being sick now and he could hear Clare talking to him in that low, throaty, voice of hers. Hearing her, he felt a sudden surge of resentment. The least she could do was show a little common consideration. Bringing some guy up here and letting him get sick all over the place! This did it. This was the payoff. Who's she been bringing up here for months? College boys, office clerks, punks! Ten bucks here, fifteen there. The best had only left twenty-five, and he hadn't bothered to come back. Now she'd brought one that was sick! She wasn't trying. He'd told her before and he'd tell her again. Only this time so she'd remember it.

He listened. He could hear Clare moving about but the man was still quiet. He fumbled for a cigarette,

found one and lit it. Ten lousy bucks! How could anyone live on that kind of money? When things had been going good, before they'd cracked down on the syndicate, he'd spent plenty of dough on her, all right. Clothes, jewelry, furs, car, swell apartment, the works. Even married her. He, Joe, Young Bookie Most Likely to Succeed, he'd married her. Best looking girl in the city, they said. Best looking call girl, they meant, but he'd married her anyway. Set her up in real style so she could be decent and respectable. All right, so now he was down on his luck. All right, so she did have to go back to work for a while. So what? She'd done it before, she could do it again. Typists and stenographers went back to work after they were married. One trade or another, what's the difference?

But ten bucks! Any high school girl with a build could do better than that.

He heard Clare walk up to the door, then knock softly.

"Joe," she said, "Joe, are you awake?"

Awake, he thought, she wants to know if I'm awake. How the hell could anyone sleep with that kind of racket going on. He reached over and flicked on the light. The sudden brightness burned against his eyes and he buried his face in his hands, letting the light trickle slowly through his fingers until he became accustomed to it.

"Joe," she said again, hearing the click of the light switch, knowing he was awake. "I brought a guy up here and he got sick. He's passed out on the bathroom floor." She waited, listening.

He did not move. His mouth tasted rotten and his head had begun to ache again. To hell with her. She'd picked the slob up. Let her take care of him.

"Joe," she said, pleading now, "I can't lift him. Help me get him up on the couch. Please, Joe?"

To hell with her.

"He brought a bottle with him, Joe. It's still half full."

He picked his bottle off the floor and held it to the light. Just one good slug left. Not half full. Not a lot of good slugs. Just one. A man couldn't travel very far on that. Like they say, you can't fly on one wing. He tilted the bottle to his lips and drained it. Then he stood up and walked to the door, his bare feet slapping against the floor. He turned the key in the lock. He always kept it locked. Didn't want some clown stumbling in the wrong room and finding him. He didn't give a damn about the guy but he had his pride, hadn't he?

He opened the door. Clare was standing there, still in her evening gown, the one he had always liked, the tight blue one. He stopped, framed in the doorway, and looked at her. By God, she was still a good looking dame. Sometimes he almost forgot, living like this. Still

had her figure. He rubbed his hand across his sagging paunch. More than he could say. Still had those same long tapered legs, those same smooth soft curves of thigh and stomach, those same breasts, firm and full, that she'd had when he met her. What was the matter with these guys? Ten bucks. Ten lousy bucks. Didn't they know a woman when they saw one?

"He's in the bathroom," she said. "He got sick in the cab coming over. He drank a lot and it was pretty close in the cab."

The blonde hair was all hers, too. No bleach job. All hers, like the pink and white complexion. Still a good looking dame. He ran his tongue over his lips. The eyes a little dark and tired, maybe, a line or two here and there, but still a good looking dame. He felt a quick unaccustomed warmth.

"Come on, Joe," she said, urging, "help me get him up on the couch."

He suddenly reached out and pulled her to him, forcing her body against his, violently, brutally, crushing her lips beneath his own, running his hand across her bare shoulders, down the flesh-soft smoothness of her back, down. For a moment she went limp and then he felt her stiffen and push herself away. He reached for her again, breathing hard.

"Not now, Joe," she said, looking over her shoulder to the half open bathroom door. "Later. After we get him taken care of. Later, Joe." She backed away.

He looked at her. Damn. A man couldn't even make love to his own wife in his own apartment any more.

She was across the room. "Come on, Joe. Help me with him." She was smiling now, enticing, promising.

Okay, why make a big thing out of it. Get this joker out of the way. Then we'll see if she still remembers her Joe. We'll see.

He walked across the floor to the bathroom door. "Where's the bottle?" he wanted to know. "You said there was half a bottle."

"After we move him," she said. "I'll get it after we move him."

He wheeled, his frayed nerves snapping. "After we move him," he shouted, "after we move him. Everything is after we move him." He smashed his fist down on a small end table and a lamp teetered crazily and crashed to the floor. "I want a drink now!"

"Okay," she said, her practiced voice soothing, calm. "Okay, Joe, keep your voice down. I'll get it for you." She went into the kitchen.

He realized that he was trembling, and when she came back and held the fifth out to him he snatched it from her and put it to his lips, hearing the pleasant gurgle, feeling the warmth of it spread through his body, not putting it down until he felt the trembling pass. He took a deep breath of satis-

faction, feeling new, whole, alive again.

She was standing there watching him. Just standing there, her eyes half-narrowed, something burning deep behind them. He tried to make it out. Was it hate? Loathing? Passion? Want? He gave it up. Why try to guess. He moistened his lips. He'd find out, no guessing, in a couple minutes now.

"All right," he said, suddenly impatient, "let's get this over with. Let's get this punk out of here."

She started toward him, to help.

"I'll take care of it," he told her, flexing his arms, swelling his chest. "I can handle him."

She stopped.

He pushed the bathroom door fully open and placed the bottle down on the floor inside. The man was lying on his back, on the floor, his head between the toilet and the tub, his feet toward the door. He was fully dressed. His clothes were rumpled and mussed but well-cut, his shoes newly shined. He looked like money. Not a lot, but enough. He wasn't too old, maybe thirty-five, not bad looking. There was a thick gold wedding band on his left hand and he was asleep and breathing deeply. Out. Out cold.

If there had been any mess, Clare had cleaned it up. Thank God for that. He wouldn't have been in any mood for what was coming if he'd had to take care of that, too.

He took the man by the feet and pulled him into the center of the bathroom floor. The leather of the shoes was warm and smooth in his hands. Good shoes, expensive shoes. Expensive. Money. Then he remembered. He looked over his shoulder at Clare, standing in the door. "How much did he pay you?"

She shook her head. "He didn't. We didn't do anything. He got sick first."

He snorted, looking down at the man, nudging him with a bare foot. "Hell," he said, "he owes you anyway. It wasn't your fault. You were willing." He knelt down and reached under the man and extracted his billfold. He stood up.

"No, Joe," she said, "he doesn't owe me anything. Put it back."

He ignored her, pulling the bills out, looking at them, counting them.

"Put it back, Joe," she said again, her voice hard now. "We don't have to roll anybody. We don't need money that bad."

He was tearing wildly at the billfold, ripping out the seams, throwing cards and papers about the room. Suddenly he slammed it to the floor and dropped to his knees beside the man, clawing, tearing at his pockets.

"Joe," she almost screamed, not understanding, "Joe, stop it!"

He looked up, still on his knees, his face grotesque with rage and frustration. "You know what he had? You know what this bastard

was going to pay you?" He held the bills up and let them drop from his hand and fall on the man, one by one, as though they were pieces of filth. "Seven! Seven lousy goddam bucks!" He lashed out and hit the man full in the face with his open palm, hard.

"Joe," she screamed, frightened. "Cut it out."

"Cut it out," he shouted back, mimicking her voice. "Cut it out. You bring a cheap bastard up here to sleep with you for seven bucks and you tell me to cut it out." He slapped the man again, backhand this time, and a trickle of blood began to run down from the man's torn lip.

The man mumbled but did not move.

She flared at him, her voice not screaming now but again hard, cutting. "You put that money back, Joe," she said evenly. "You put that money back and leave him alone or I'm going to call the cops."

The words had a sobering effect but he laughed at her, derisively. "You're going to call the cops? You, with a customer out cold on the floor? Don't try to kid me." His eyes traveled over her until they came to her breasts and lingered there. He watched them rise and fall, sharply outlined, straining against the flimsy blue stuff of the dress. He reached over and picked up the bottle and took another long drink, not taking his eyes from her. "Anyway, Baby, you and I still have a little business to take care of."

Unsteadily, he got to his feet.

She was backing across the room, away from him. "No, Joe, no. Please. Not tonight."

He began to walk toward her, swaying, the bottle in one hand, the crushed bills which he had again picked up in the other. He held the money out to her. "Come on, Baby, I'm a customer. I've got money. Seven bucks. That's all we think you're worth—he," he jerked his head back over his shoulder, "and me, your husband."

Her face was taut, chalk-white, her nostrils distended. "You're not my husband. You're not anything." She spat the words at him, angry, crying, hating words. "You're not anything but a no-good drunken pimp."

The words staggered him, stunned him, words which he knew but had not wanted to hear, had not dared to admit, even to himself. He stood in the center of the floor, his chest pumping; the room beginning to spin wildly about him. Then a blinding wave of rage engulfed him and swept him up and he started for her, a deep animal cry in his throat, compelled to destroy this woman who had dared to name him for what he was.

She was almost at the hall door and she had half turned when the bottle caught her on the temple,

bouncing off and shattering against the frame of the door. She crumpled to the floor, making no sound, no protest.

Instantly he was on his knees beside her, holding her in the crook of his arm, dabbing ineffectively at the ugly broken, bleeding bruise. "Clare, Clare, my God, I didn't mean to, Clare." Tears had already begun to form at the corners of his eyes and a sudden sob racked him.

She did not move. Her head hung back and her rouge and lipstick were garish on the pallor of her face. Her moan tilted the room, turning it, and everything was unreal, impossible, nightmarish as the red heat of anger consumed him.

Still holding her, he slowly lifted his eyes, blinking them, striving for focus, lifted them until they came to and rested on the legs and shoes of the man he had left in the bathroom. The shoes. The expensive shoes. Go ahead, lay there, you bastard. Sleep sound. You've got no worries. Your wife is safe in bed at home. So what if she is tired of you? You can buy someone else's wife for the night. Reasonable, too. This one won't get tired of you. This one isn't like your wife. This one's got to support a drunken husband who hasn't had a job in five years. This one needs the money. But seven bucks, you bastard. Where's your sense of values? You could at least pay as much for another man's wife as you do for your shoes.

He looked down at Clare. Her features were calm, reposed. He could not remember when she had looked so beautiful.

His eyes went back to the legs, down the legs to the shoes. And so that was all he had thought of her. Seven bucks' worth. Not even ten. Seven. Clare, not worth as much as the shoes he was wearing. His hand dropped to the floor and fastened around the neck of the broken bottle and slowly raised the six inches of ragged broken glass.

Gently he lowered Clare to the floor, smoothing her evening gown, the one he had always liked, the tight blue one, making her comfortable. She moaned but his eyes did not waver from the man.

He got to his feet then and began to walk toward the bathroom, slowly, steadily, the bottle neck in his hand, the sharp ragged edges outthrust. Seven. Seven lousy bucks. Seven bucks worth of woman. Seven bucks worth of wife. Sleep, you bastard, sleep and dream. Dream of the bargain you got this time. You'll never find another one like it again. Not ever, you won't.

"Puddin' and Pie"

BY DeFORBES

I STOOD outside and watched them as they pranced before the small barred window, little children singing a twisted version of an innocent nursery rhyme. I had sent them away several times before, but they seemed to be fascinated even by the very dirt on which the jail stood. There they played their games of mumblypeg,

Sliced up Mae and made her die.
Tomorrow's the day he has to pay.

little girls brought their corncob dolls—and they sang:

"Georgie Porgie, Puddin' and Pie
Sliced up Mae and made her die.
Tomorrow's the day he has to pay—
Poor Georgie Porgie can't run away."

Once again I sent them off. As the childish prattle echoed up and down the heat-laden twilight streets a pair of soft, pudgy hands clutched the lowest visible part of the barred window. The hands themselves were obscene—fat and soiled, yet white—like the underbody of an eel. To me they represented untold agony, expressing the torment within the creature who owned them. Torment that could never hope to be realized, much less expressed.

Murder had been committed, the trial held, and the verdict delivered. There was nothing the jury could do but find him guilty. But it was obvious to all that he wasn't responsible, that he had no idea of the enormity of what he had done. When I protested this they told me that their laws provided no alternative. "You folks back East," the Sheriff said, "You got places to put ones like George here. Out here there's nothin'—just the end of a rope." I have vowed that I shall try and change this situation. But, as in the way of all reform, it will be too late for Georgie and his mother. Now it was time for me, as a servant of God, to try and bring some sort of peace to that poor body with the empty mind. It was the most difficult task I had ever faced in my long years of service. I knew in my heart that I would fail, but I had to go in—to try again.

The thing that was called George Finley hunched in the darkest corner of the sweltering cell. It resembled, at first, a massive pink spider clad in overalls. As I approached there was movement and a head emerged from the shapeless mass. The eyes were blank and the mouth moved, drooling slightly. The hair was sparse and the pink scalp made me think of hurt, new-healing flesh. The wet mouth stretched and I knew he was smiling. Georgie was glad to see me—a fact which made it all the harder. I did not know how to help him die tomorrow.

"Howdy, Mr. Ryson. Did you come to play with me? I know a new game." The voice was a man's, as was the grotesque body—but the thoughts were perpetually child-like. Each day I came he urged me to play some game or another that bloomed in the arid soil of his idiot brain.

"No games today, Georgie." I sat on the stool by the bed. "How do you feel?"

"All right, I guess. I don't like it much here though. Ma will be comin' soon to take me home, won't she?" The bass voice quivered in childish concern.

"Very soon, Georgie, very soon," I soothed him. Then hoping to divert his simple thoughts I asked, "What have you been doing all day, Georgie?"

"Just sittin' here listenin'. I could hear them out there singin'. It's such a pretty song. Why can't I go out and play with them?"

It was a pretty song! Father in Heaven! I wondered as I sat there and watched him how he had managed to live so long. Only because his mother was always with him from the very beginning. Except for that one day. She was his friend, his play-mate and his protector. And one day she left him alone for just a little while. She went to a seamstress for a new dress. Now Mrs. Finley would wear that dress—at her son's hanging.

The first name I heard, I think, when I came to Dawsonville was that of Mrs. Finley, the doctor's wife. "She's a saint," they told me. I felt that they were right. Georgie was her cross—and the load was heavy. But if she were a saint and Georgie was the fruit of their union—did that make Doc the devil?

I sat in the abysmal cell and tried to find words to tell Georgie that God loved him, regardless of what he'd done. As I fumbled with the seemingly unsolvable problem I heard the corridor door open and she appeared, her black-gloved hands welded in unspoken supplication.

"Georgie," she said and he wiggled like the whelp of some unspeakable animal. "Georgie, are you all right? How do you do, Reverend?"

"Ma," he cried. She went swiftly to him, her fingers smoothing the wrinkled clothing. She searched the faded blue eyes anxiously.

"Ma, I want to go home. I don't want to stay here anymore. I'm tired of playing jail. Let's go home and play something else. Can't we, Ma? Please."

She turned towards me and the anguish in her eyes was such that I had to leave. I, whose purpose in life is to give solace, had nothing to offer this woman in her hour of need. They sat there together—mother and son—saint and sacrifice—stone and sand.

Sheriff Collins was reading wanted circulars at his desk. "Howdy, Reverend. Converted Georgie yet?" The remark was intended to be humorous, but the Sheriff's eyes were not laughing. I read in them the puzzled anger of a man who has a job to do, but has not the will to do it. George Finley had been the object of derision all his life—but no one wanted to kill him—in spite of the crime he had committed.

"Has Doc Finley been around yet?" I asked. Doc Finley had disappeared into the depths of his office the day of the murder and had remained there, not even coming out to eat as far as we could

tell. The scorn of the whole town was cast upon him. His only child convicted of murder—and now would die—and his father had not even come to say good-bye. He had been a taciturn man, the Doctor, a hard man and not really well-liked, but he had done his job well and was respected, as suited his position, until now.

Of course, there had been rumors about him and Mae Miller. Mae Miller, who had been carved up like a Christmas turkey by her employer's idiot son. Rumors about Mae Miller—and the others before her, but the whispers had never seemed justified. The girls had just quit working and left town never to be heard of again. Mae Miller wasn't as lucky as her predecessors. Mae hadn't been able to leave and begin again—Mae, with her pretty face and her starched white nurse's uniform.

No one knew the motive for Georgie's horrible crime—but then no one knows what battles occur between a child's mind and a man's body. He had done it—there was no doubt about that. He had stood there with the bleeding scalpel, pleased beyond reason with his hideous accomplishment. "That was fun, wasn't it, Mae? Let's do it again." He had protested when the mangled body didn't respond—he had protested when they had taken the knife from him. A razor-sharp blade stolen from his father's instrument bag. As I said, there was nothing the jury could do but find him guilty. And now there was nothing we could do but carry out the dreadful ritual.

I should have gone back to the parish house—I had a sermon to compose—but since the time was so near I somehow couldn't tear myself away from the proximity of the jail. Like the children who had returned again to sing their little song . . . *"Georgie Porgie, Puddin' and Pie . . ."* The lure was irresistible—I could only pray that my reason for remaining was not morbid curiosity, too.

Mrs. Finley came into the office, weeping silently. She was a big woman, typical of those who first came to this pioneer country. Doc, his wife and child showed up in Dawsonville when Georgie was a baby. It was before my time there, but they tell me Doc was a gay blade with a handsome wife. Time had aged them and marked them with sober faces and sad eyes. But time had passed Georgie by—he would never be more than that baby. I couldn't find a soul to whom they had complained. So we didn't know how they felt toward George or toward each other. We could only guess of the devotion—and watch George's mother's hands. They were the gauge to her feelings—sometimes the only gauge. She was strong and silent for the most part, though she seemed to talk often enough with Georgie. Many's the time I had

seen them together, the big woman holding the big child's hand as they ventured forth into the surrounding countryside on some mysterious errand of their own.

Why, I wondered, hadn't Doc Finley come forth to comfort her? What sort of man could fail his family at a time like this? I didn't know Doc well, but then no one did. And he never attended my services. I sighed and looked through the window to the sky for some sign of help. But all I saw was the scaffold looming black and tall against the vivid sunset.

Perhaps, I thought, that was something I could do. I set out for Doc's office through the black desert heat. There was no light in the small building, but I pounded on the door. There was no answer.

"Doctor Finley," I called, "this is Reverend Ryson. May I please come in?" A stray breeze lifted a scrap of paper in reply.

I pleaded with him then. I told him in the best words I could choose how his family needed him. But words were not enough and in the hot silence of the night he answered, "Get out of here. I have no family!" And so it seemed that there was nothing I could do.

We sat the night out, Mrs. Finley, the Sheriff and myself. We said very little, but towards morning she whispered, "It is, perhaps, just as well. Who would look after him when I am gone?" There seemed to be no answer.

With the sunrise she went in to Georgie, taking his breakfast. I went too—still searching for something—anything to make it easier for them. He ate happily and noisily, some of the food dribbling down his chin. His mother did not seem to care. She crooned to him and caressed his sparse fine hair. "We're going to play a new game today, Georgie," she told him, a strained smile on her bony face. "I'll tell you how it goes and we'll have a good time and when it's over—" her voice wavered, "when it's over, I'll take you home. Will you like that, Georgie?"

"Yeah, Ma. Sure. You know I always like new games. What is this one called, Ma?"

She stared at her hands a moment, then clearing her throat she began, "It's called Hanging, Georgie. Hanging. Reverend Ryson, here, he'll play, too, and the Sheriff and maybe some more of your friends will be there to play. You'd like that, wouldn't you? It won't take long and then we can go home afterwards like I promised."

"Aw right, Ma. You explain it to me so I'll know how to play. I wouldn't want to make a mistake." As I watched the two of them I knew I was not needed. I could do nothing she couldn't do. She was playing a game with her child and she was his whole world. Quietly I withdrew as she began to explain the "rules" of Hanging.

Back in the office several men sat staring at the tobacco-stained floor. Outside a false breeze stirred the dust faintly and then subsided in a hopeless fight against the inexorable desert. I joined the waiters. The door opened and more silent men entered. There were no more seats and they stood, blocking the windows, especially the one window framing the dark finger of death. We all waited . . . and soon she came.

"It's almost time, isn't it?" she asked as she wiped her reddened eyes. The Sheriff nodded. She looked around at the silent faces. Her hands trembled slightly and clutched each other. "Has anyone," her voice stumbled, "has anyone seen Doc yet?" No one replied. The answer was obvious. "It's all right," she said, "He'll come home soon." The hands were calm again as though she had forced their pose. "Georgie is ready, Sheriff . . ." you could hardly hear the last words, ". . . and so am I."

There was quite a crowd outside. An eerie, quiet crowd. I had never seen a hanging before, but I had some sort of idea that these vital, fighting people with their black and white ideas of wrong and right would feel a frightening emotion, almost of elation, at a time like this. I was wrong. They stood without a murmur, their faces stony, as he emerged. Georgie shuffled happily along between his mother and the Sheriff, crooning the insidious nursery rhyme and greeting old acquaintances.

"Hi, Lennie. We're going to play a game. Isn't this fun? Did you come to play, too? Hello, Tex. I missed you lately. You ain't been in town for quite a spell. Hi, Slim. Don't forget you said I could ride your horse. Maybe after we play hanging, huh?" He greeted almost every one of the long row, but they could not answer. Most had never answered him in life so he didn't seem to mind or even notice as he walked in the shadow. They left her at the gallows steps and there she stood, a great rock of a woman who moved only her hands in meaningless gestures and looked upwards as the final act was about to begin. Georgie wavered and tittered in childish amusement as the rope tickled his elephantine neck. I opened my prayer book and stepped forward.

Georgie was not through, however. He called from behind the red kerchief that served as a blindfold, "Isn't this enough, Ma? I don't want to play this game anymore. I want to go home now, like you promised." There was no answer, just a muffled sob from somewhere deep within the crowd. "I been good, Ma," he tried to step forward, but the rope pulled him back. "I did just like you showed me. I played the game. But I'm tired now, I want to go home." The Sheriff's hand reached

for the trap lever, eager to shut off the childish pleading. "Come on, Ma, let's go home. You promised I could play Doctor again. That was the best game of all. You said I could operate again—like I did with Mae. You showed me just how to do it, remember, and you said I could operate again . . . on Pa. When are we going to operate on Pa?"

The Sheriff's hand moved in fatal surprise and could not be stopped. The trap door yawned.

God's words were on my lips, but I could not speak.

Above the murmur of the crowd, the snap of the neck, the thud of the body, droned the dry rasp of the mother's voice . . . "The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want . . ."

Others Agree

MANHUNT strives at all times to bring you the very best in suspense-crime fiction—and it's gratifying to have others agree. David C. Cooke's latest BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR anthology (the oldest and most recognized yearly collection of detective-crime stories) contains *two* stories from 1955's MANHUNT pages: "First Offense," by Evan Hunter and "Custody" by Richard Deming. BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR is now available at your bookstore, or E. P. Dutton and Co., 300 Fourth Avenue, N. Y., N. Y.

Biggest Risk

A Novelette

BY C. B. GILFORD

"Get it over with," she said. "I won't fight you." He laughed, because he didn't have that in mind at all.

HE PREFERRED to work in the sunshine. In the big department store parking lot, for instance, there was an attendant after dark. None during the day. So in a way that made it easier. But in another way it took more nerve. That made him feel good, knowing he had nerve.

He got there early in the afternoon, spent an hour or so before he made his choice. He didn't appear suspicious to anyone, because he was well dressed, and he might have been there on legitimate business, such as waiting for his wife while she shopped. He strolled around, looking at the cars and at the people who got out of them. Especially the women.

He considered several. There was

the middle-aged lady in the black Cadillac who carried a huge purse. The purse interested him, but the lady was frail, possibly had heart trouble, might scare too easily. He didn't want that. There was the tallish blonde in the tailored slacks. The slacks interested him too, and the way she walked in them. He even followed her a bit. But she was athletic, she carried her head high, and was sort of fearless-looking. He felt slightly afraid of her. And he couldn't have that.

The choice eventually was a kind of in-between. She drove up in a fiery-red hardtop. He watched her climb out, nyloned legs first, then a sleek black dress and fur piece. Very stylish, he thought. Thirty maybe, undoubtedly married, with a good figure that was just beginning to incline a little to weight. Maybe she dyed her hair a bit, but her face was young, smooth, rather happy.

He followed her too. She was unaware of it, because her spike heels clattered noisily on the pavement. He liked her walk, her clothes. She had money, he thought, a husband who let her spend it, and not a care in the world. "You'll do," he said softly. "I'll wait for you." And he let her go into the store.

He sauntered back to his own car. It was easy to find among all the newer, shinier models. His was an eight-year-old sedan with imperfect paint and a layer of dust. But it was not old or dirty enough to be conspicuous. He drove it to the empty parking place next to the red hardtop. He backed into the spot, so that the driver's doors of the two cars were side by side. Then he sat patiently.

An hour passed. Two hours. The autumn sun had made it warm inside the car, and several times he wiped perspiration from his face. He consulted his watch occasionally. But he was in no real hurry. Even if it got dark and the attendant came on duty and he had to leave, there was still no great loss. Tomorrow would be another day.

But she came, just before five o'clock. He saw the swishing black dress and heard the clicking of the spike heels. She carried no packages, which pleased him. He wasn't interested in the lingerie or perfume she might have bought. But she must have bought something, because she seemed happy. As she came close he could hear her humming gaily.

He allowed her to pass between the two cars, but before she could unlock and open the door of hers, he opened his own. She was trapped there, but she didn't realize it at first. She stood back, still humming, and waited for him to close the door and leave. When he failed to do this, but stared at her instead, she looked just a trifle annoyed and said, "Pardon me, but I'd like to get in my car."

"Get into mine," he told her, and showed her his gun.

This was the crucial moment, he knew. She could have turned and run, and he wouldn't have dared to pursue her or to shoot. Or she simply could have screamed, which would have made him jump into his car and drive away fast, hoping she wouldn't think to note the license number. But she didn't do either of these clever things, because he had the advantage of shock and surprise.

"Get in," he repeated in a harder tone.

Her face was deathly pale and her jaw was slack, letting tiny folds of flabby flesh show at her throat. She was thirty-five rather than thirty, he decided. But he still wanted her. He waved the gun in the direction he desired her to go. She climbed in hastily, wriggling desperately past the steering wheel. He put the gun in his left-hand coat pocket and followed her.

"Don't try to attract anybody's attention or I'll kill you," he warned.

She sat very still, staring straight ahead. She'll behave, he thought. He started the engine. The car moved unmolested out of the parking lot, headed down a side street, away from the mainstream of rush-hour traffic. They drove for fifteen minutes without conversation, weaving gradually toward the outskirts of town, using little-traveled roads. But he could just as easily have driven through the business sections. She gave him no trouble.

When he was almost at his destination, he gave her a curt order. "Get out of sight. Lie down on the seat."

She obeyed quickly. He drove on for two minutes more, to all outward appearances alone in the car. He turned into a driveway, through garage doors he had left standing open. Then he cut the ignition, got out, and shut the garage doors from the inside. When he returned to the car and switched on the dome light, she was still crouching where he had left her.

"You can sit up now," he told her.

She responded like a puppet. Her hat was somewhat askew now. She didn't look quite as stylish as before. "What do you want with me?" she asked in a hoarse whisper and with a kind of choking dread, as if she knew the answer.

He smiled, knowing what she must be thinking. And knowing how wrong she was, how she underestimated him.

But already it seemed that the uncertainty of her fate was frightening her the most. "Are you going to rob me?" she asked him. The flabby part of her neck twitched.

Yes, he thought, among other things. "Give me your purse," he said.

She handed it to him without question. He fished in it, found a wallet. It contained two twenties and three ones. He shoved the bills carelessly into his pocket, handed back the big purse and then com-

menced to examine the rest of the contents of the wallet.

"Mrs. Lucille Roth," he read from the driver's license. "That your name?"

"Yes."

"Always like to know who I've got."

She was looking around the interior of the garage. The dim wooden walls pressed close in around the car, and what might be beyond the walls or how near another human being might be, she couldn't know, of course. She was perfectly alone in this narrow space with him.

"Roth," he said. "Familiar name. Not the auto stores?"

"Yes. My husband is James Roth."

"Any children?"

"Two. Girl seven and a boy three."

Obviously she was wondering whether these facts would help her. So he wore a smile which told her nothing.

He consulted the back of the driver's license. "Looks like you've had a few tickets, Lucy," he commented, using her name deliberately. "Speeding, driving through a red light. I'll bet you don't like cops, do you, Lucy?"

Her eyes widened, but she said nothing.

"Bet you'd like to have a couple of them here right now though, wouldn't you?"

She stared at him, and he smiled again and continued exploring the wallet. Membership cards mostly, Junior League, country club, Philharmonic Orchestra Association, P.T.A. All very high-and-mighty. Then at the bottom of everything was a small snapshot. The two kids. He waved it at her. "What are their names?" he wanted to know.

"Lisa and Douglas."

"Fancy."

She seemed to take a little courage from his sneer. "What do you want with me?" she asked him again.

"You wearing any jewelry?" he asked in return.

For an answer she peeled the black glove off her left hand, tugged a time or two, then handed him a pair of rings. He glanced at them. Wedding and engagement ring. The latter had a good-sized diamond in it. He put them into his pocket, although he knew he'd never have the nerve to try to sell them.

"What about the watch?" he said.

She gave it to him.

"Earrings?"

They came off quickly. She didn't seem to feel any pain as she wrenched them from her ears. He stowed everything in the same pocket.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that's everything. Now will you let me go?"

He shook his head.

"But you wanted to rob me. You've got everything. Let me go."

"Who said I wanted to rob you?" he questioned mockingly.

"But you have."

"Oh sure. As long as you're here. But I didn't go to all this trouble just for forty-three bucks and some cheap jewelry."

She swallowed, and had trouble doing it. Her thoughts were clear in her face—she wasn't going to escape with the minimum loss and inconvenience—there was worse in store. "What are you going to do?" she asked slowly.

He was silent. Let her guess.

"Listen," she said after a moment. "My husband doesn't have a lot of money. Really he doesn't. We spend it too fast. But he can scrape together a few thousand. I know he can do that. And he'll do it without any questions. I'll write him or call him, whatever you want me to do. ... This is a kidnapping, isn't it?"

He let her rave, then he answered quietly, "Who said it was a kidnapping?"

"But you want money, don't you?"

"Sure, everybody does. But money isn't everything."

She closed her eyes, seemed to be making a supreme effort to control herself. Even without eyes her face was eloquent. She was afraid, on the edge of terror.

"There's only one thing left," she said. "Rape."

Still he refused to give her a clue to his intentions. Finally she opened her eyes again; the terror was there, waiting to give voice to a scream. But she didn't scream.

"I have two children and I love my husband," she told him.

He merely looked at her.

"Get it over with," she said. "I won't fight you. I don't want to get hurt.

She was smarter than most, he thought. He liked that. It fitted in with his plans. Too bad for her though.

She'd closed her eyes again. He reached across the seat and took her by the shoulders. As she'd promised, she didn't resist. She came limply, like a sack full of something soft, or like a dead thing. He kissed her on the mouth. Dead flesh. He pushed her back, then struck as hard as he could with his left palm on the side of her face. She opened her eyes, surprised as he knew she'd be. He laughed softly.

"You think you're beautiful, I suppose, huh, Lucy? You think you're so damned beautiful that every man who sees you wants to rape you. You've got your nerve all right."

She sat back in her corner of the seat and stared at him. She seemed to be feeling something between relief and fear of the yet unknown. But the fear, because she was still here with him, was the stronger.

"What do you want then?" she wondered.

He didn't tell her.

"If it isn't robbery ... or kidnapping ... or rape ... what is it then? What is there left?"

Now she was on the track.

She watched him with fascination as he reached into the dashboard compartment and drew out a flashlight. "Get out," he ordered, "and go around to the back of the car."

She obeyed, groping in the dimness, and he followed her. He'd taken the car keys with him and now he unlocked the trunk, lifted the heavy metal cover till it clicked into the full open position. "Get inside," he said.

For the first time she failed to do as she was told immediately. "What for?" she demanded with a sudden spark of courage.

He wondered, if she decided to fight, if he could handle her without harm to himself. A shot might be heard outside. He'd have to subdue her with his own strength. She was not a small woman. But she was soft. He knew that from having touched her. Reflecting on her softness renewed his own courage.

He spoke with remorseless authority. "I've drilled air holes in the floor, so you won't suffocate. And I've taken all the tools out, incidentally. So don't think you'll find a wrench in there to brain me with. Now climb in."

He illuminated her dark prison with his flashlight. She went into it slowly, gingerly, clumsily. He wanted to laugh—and he did—at the ridiculous picture she made, sleek nylons, tight black dress, fur piece and all, scrambling into that dirty, dusty hole. In the process she lost one of her shoes. He picked it up from the garage floor, an expensive-looking black suede job. Hardly a weapon, but it would make a loud noise if pounded on metal.

"Gimme the other one," he ordered.

She handed it to him meekly. He threw them both into a corner. Then he took the little box from his pocket, opened it and showed her the small red capsule. "This will make you sleep, Lucy," he said.

She stared at the thing and shook her head.

"It's this or the gun butt," he threatened.

She accepted the capsule hastily and popped it into her mouth. He watched with amusement the difficulty she had in swallowing it dry. He probed inside of her mouth with his flashlight to make sure.

"You'll go to sleep in a few minutes," he said, "and I'll see you in the morning. But I won't be far away in the meantime. If you try to make any noise I'll kill you."

He knew from the look on her face that she believed him. She hadn't given any trouble yet, and wasn't likely to now. She was already too used to obeying him. And he'd been careful to hold out just enough hope to her to get co-operation in return. He could read her. If she behaved perfectly, there might still be a chance. But he laughed inwardly. There was no chance.

He closed the trunk and locked

it. Then he opened the garage doors and strolled out into the open air. It was almost dusk, six o'clock by his watch. He smoked a cigarette. Be patient, he told himself. Probably just about now they'll be expecting her home for dinner, James and Lisa and Douglas. The husband will wait maybe half an hour more. Then he'll start calling, her friends, the country club. When finally he doesn't locate her, he'll call the police. He'll tell them she went shopping, and that will lead them to the car. Then the hunt will be on. But it will all take time. Be patient. Tomorrow the real fun begins.

Half a dozen cigarettes and almost an hour later he unlocked the trunk to look at Lucy. She lay still, breathing deeply. The flashlight shining directly in her eyes failed to disturb her. He was satisfied. She'd keep till morning. He locked the trunk again, locked the garage, and went into the house.

"Where have you been?" his sister asked him without interest.

"Over at Eddie's," he said. He knew several Eddies, and she didn't care anyway. He made himself a sandwich and had a bottle of beer. After that, as he often did, he watched television till past midnight. There were several newscasts, and he was a little disappointed when none of them mentioned Lucille Roth.

He checked the car trunk again before he went to bed. All was well. Be patient, he cautioned himself again. It would be ridiculously easy to kill her now and dump her somewhere. But it would be too easy. Anybody could do it that way.

He went inside and had another bottle of beer. He wasn't a narcotics user. Beer was enough for him. It made him sleep.

...And it did. He awoke fairly late, almost nine, and had a solitary breakfast because by this time of day he was alone in the house. The portable radio told him the nine o'clock news. Which included just a very brief announcement about a Lucille Roth being missing.

He went out to the garage to see Lucy. He found her only half awake, still groggy from the sedative. And she'd been crying. Her soiled face was tear-stained.

"I'm thirsty," she whispered to him. "Can I have a drink?"

"Maybe later," he told her. "I don't want you to be able to scream very loud for a while."

That brought her fully awake quite suddenly. To the half-remembered fears of yesterday, a new one now was added. She questioned mutely.

"I'm going to drive to a certain place," he went on. "You may know where we are when we get there. You may want to scream to attract attention. I can promise you something though. If you do scream they'll never get you out of that trunk alive. I've got a gun, remember." He showed it to her again.

"I'll empty it right through the trunk lid. And you'll never know whether they get me or not."

He watched her to calculate the effect of his words. Then he told himself he didn't have to worry. Her answer was written in her face. She didn't want to die just so that he might die too. She wanted to see Lisa and Douglas again. He closed the trunk and locked it.

He opened the garage doors, got into the car, and backed out. Then he headed off in an unfamiliar direction. He drove at a moderate pace and obeyed all traffic signals. No one knew he was not driving alone.

He found the Roth house without much difficulty. Once he was on the right street he needn't have known the exact number. Two police cars were in front of the place. He approached slowly, circled the block once, and returned. This second time he rediscovered his nerve. He parked just across the street from the police cars.

There was a cop in one of the cars. This cop looked at the new arrival for a moment, but there was no curiosity in the look. The cop went back to listening to his radio.

He smiled at the cop's reaction and breathed easier. Then he studied the house. A real nice place, a new ranch type, almost a mansion. Lucy had had things real soft, he thought. A lot softer than that hard trunk floor.

Almost half an hour passed without visible activity. There were cops in the house, of course. They would be questioning James Roth. Is there any place, Mr. Roth, that your wife might have gone that you haven't mentioned yet? Was your wife in good physical health? Anything seem wrong with her mentally? Well, did she have any enemies?

It was all very funny.

He got out of his own car finally and strolled over to the police car. The cop in it instantly became a little more alert. But not a lot more.

"What can I do for you, buddy?" he wanted to know, not unfriendly.

"This is the Roth home, isn't it? Heard on the radio that Mrs. Roth is missing."

"That's right. You know anything about it?"

"Oh no."

"What do you want then?"

"Just curious."

"You a friend of the Roths?"

"Don't know 'em."

"Why are you so curious then?"

"I'm a student of criminology."

The cop seemed amused. "Think there's been a crime?" he asked.

"Probably. Rich people. Things always happen to rich people. You don't mind if I hang around, do you?"

"No, I guess there's no law against it."

So he hung around. This particular cop wasn't very talkative though. The radio chatter wasn't very interesting either. He got tired

of it quickly and went back and sat in his own car.

Another car drove up while he waited. A man got out of it and went into the house. He looked like a reporter. Within fifteen minutes still another car arrived. One of its occupants went into the house while the second snapped a picture of the house itself. The caption under that picture, when it appeared in the afternoon paper, would undoubtedly read, "This is the palatial residence of Mr. and Mrs. James Roth, from which Mrs. Roth disappeared sometime Tuesday . . ."

Both the reporters came out after a while and they and the photographer drove away. It was too bad, because they just missed another good picture. The red hardtop came down the street and swung into the driveway. It had scarcely braked to a complete stop when four more men came out of the house.

As he sat there watching, he realized with a sudden thrill that one of these four must be James Roth. It was the big, bare-headed, shirt-sleeved man. The other men seemed to be asking him questions about the car and he kept nodding. Yes, this is my wife's car. But where is my wife? Where is Lucy? And then this James Roth seemed to lean against the car and put his forehead down on the roof of it. Even from a distance one could see that his shoulders were shaking.

"I love my husband," Lucy had said. Well, Lucy, maybe your husband likes you too. That's something to live for, isn't it? Too bad.

The other men led James Roth back inside the house, and the red hardtop stood there all alone. The cop in the parked cruiser listened to the radio. The newspaper men were probably thinking about what they were going to put in the afternoon editions . . .

He had lunch at a drive-in restaurant. He had two hamburgers and a chocolate milkshake. He ate them in the car. On the way back to the Roth home, he stopped at a filling station and bought a dollar's worth of gasoline, regular grade.

"Hear about the rich dame that got lost?" he asked the attendant.

The man stood with one foot on the rear bumper while he pumped gas. "Mrs. Roth?" he said. "Yeah, she used to stop in here. Nice-looking gal. They won't never find her alive."

Can you hear that, Lucy? Recognize the man's voice? Why don't you call to him, let him know you're in there? But you know what I'll do if you make any noise, don't you?

He gave the attendant a dollar bill and drove away, and out of the man's hearing he laughed. He felt warm inside. There was a pleasurable tingling in his blood. There'd been the danger, the horrible danger, because you never know what a woman will do. Now there was the immense, wonderful relief. He

didn't know which feeling he liked best. But this was the real thing. This was living...

When he got back to the Roth home, he didn't hesitate. No driving once around the block. The police cars were still there, but this time he pulled up boldly just opposite them and parked.

And he got out and walked right over to them. There was the same policeman he'd talked to that morning, and there was another one, a sergeant with three stripes on his sleeve.

"What's new?" he asked.

"Who are you?" the Sergeant wanted to know.

The other policeman supplied that information. "He was hanging around here all morning. He's a criminology student."

Both the cops laughed. Finally the Sergeant said. "Well, maybe we need a criminologist. We're not getting anywhere."

"You haven't found Mrs. Roth?"

The Sergeant shook his head.

"Any clues?"

"Net yet. This one's going to be a real dozey. She left her car in the parking lot. She went into the store. We know that because at least two clerks remember waiting on her. And they saw her walk out of the store. But nobody saw her after that."

Right then somehow he knew exactly how he wanted to do it. This Sergeant seemed willing to talk. It was just a matter of making him say the right things in the right place.

"This sounds very interesting, Sergeant," he said. "Do you mind if I get my notebook and write some things down. And I'd like to know if you have any theories on the case."

The Sergeant looked properly flattered. "Sure thing," he agreed.

He hurried back to his own car and delved into the littered glove compartment. There was a notebook in there somewhere that he had used for his horse bets. He found it now and a pencil too. But he didn't return to the Sergeant. Instead he went back and stood at the rear of his own car, just a couple of feet from Lucy, and made a show of looking at the Roth house and jotting something down.

Come over here, Sergeant, he said to himself over and over. Come over here, because I want Lucy to hear all of this.

And that's the way it happened. For a minute or so the Sergeant seemed puzzled by his inquisitor's behavior. But then, partly because he didn't have anything else to do, he came over. He too stood close to Lucy.

"Now what was it you wanted to know, buddy?" he asked.

"Oh...yes...by the way, can I have your name, Sergeant?"

"Hallock."

"Pardon me?" He made just the smallest pretense of not being able to hear too well.

"Sergeant Hallock," the Sergeant said, much louder, and spelled it.

"Have you been officially assigned to the Roth case, Sergeant Hallock?"

"Yes, temporarily. I'm working with Lieutenant Johns."

He wrote all this down faithfully. "Sergeant, is there anything at all peculiar about this case?"

"Well, the peculiar thing is that we haven't any leads."

"You don't know why Mrs. Roth disappeared?"

"Well, she either disappeared voluntarily or she was kidnapped. Since there doesn't seem to be any good reason why she should walk off on her own, we're assuming she was kidnapped."

"Why?"

"Well, the family's well off. Maybe she's being held for ransom. But we haven't heard from the kidnapper yet. But maybe it was just robbery."

"If it was robbery though, Sergeant, why hasn't Mrs. Roth come back?"

"Don't you ever read the papers, boy?" The Sergeant heaved a massive sigh. "That kind of robbery is usually complicated. The victim gets a good look at the criminal for later identification. Then to prevent later identification, the criminal gets rid of the victim."

"Murder?"

"Sure. And if that happens, the body usually isn't found for a few days."

"Sergeant, would there be any other possible motive for the kidnapping?"

"Oh, out-and-out murder, I suppose. But Roth says his wife had no enemies."

"Any other motive?"

The Seregant put one sizeable shoe up on the rear bumper and thought. "Oh, I guess anything's possible. There are just so many logical reasons for something like this. But maybe there are lots of illogical reasons. I mean reasons that nobody ever thought of till some particular guy gets some screwy idea, and then that's his reason. And it's a new reason. That's what makes it hard for us cops sometimes."

"That's very interesting, Sergeant," he said, writing. Inside he felt very proud. Was this an absolutely new reason for kidnapping a woman?

Then after a while he said, "Sergeant, how is Mr. Roth taking all this?"

"Pretty bad. I just saw him in the house there. He's kind of broken up, I'd say. I got the impression he was pretty much in love with Lucy."

"Lucy?"

"Yeah, Mrs. Roth. Name's Lucille, but he called her Lucy."

"Uh huh." He made a note of it.

And now came the really big moment. The big trial for Lucy, and the big one for himself too. He swallowed before he could make himself ask the question.

"How are the kids taking it?"

Sergeant Hallock grimaced and his jaw hardened a little. "That's the worst part of it," he said. "They're a couple of real nice kids. At first they tried to keep the news from 'em. You know, Mummy's over to Aunt Ethel's or something like that. But that kind of thing works just so long. Should have got the kids out of the house entirely. But I guess Roth didn't think of it. Thought his wife would show up any minute. And now it's too late. The kids saw the shape their father is in. And it's hard to fool kids anyway. I think they realize now that something's happened to their mother. They keep wanting to know where she is and when she's coming back. They asked me even, you know that? They'd been sent to their room to keep 'em out of the way, I guess, and I was standing in the front hall while the Lieutenant was in the kitchen with Roth. Well, those kids sneaked out, and they asked me, they asked me personally, 'Policeman, will you find our Mummy for us?' Tears in their eyes too, you know. I tell you, I had to get out of that place."

There was silence for a long moment while the Sergeant rubbed his nose with a nervous forefinger and looked away. A silence all around, a silence where the slightest word or sound would come like thunder.

This was it. He knew that. He put a hand into his coat pocket and fingered the gun, the gun which made a bulge the Sergeant had never noticed. But the gun was there. Well, Lucy? What are you going to do? One little word, Lucy, and we're both dead. I'll kill you and this cop will probably kill me because he'll think I'm shooting at him. But I'll be shooting at you, Lucy. Do you want to take the chance? Look at the chance I'm taking, Lucy. I like taking chances. What about you? You heard what the man said. We're right in front of your house, and your kids are in the house, and they're crying for you. Well, Lucy?

"What's the matter with you, buddy?" the Sergeant asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"You look white as a sheet. Something wrong?"

"It was you talking about those kids, I guess..."

"Sure, I know what you mean."

He found himself suddenly weak, and he had to lean against the side of the car for support. He heard the Sergeant talking but didn't know what he was saying. Groping, he opened a door and climbed inside. He was afraid he was going to faint.

But he didn't. He pulled away from the curb leaving the Sergeant standing there looking at him, muttering something about "these criminologists." He drove slowly for a while and gradually he felt what he'd done. He'd taken the

biggest risk he knew how to take and he'd won. He'd taken it to them and driven off with it, leaving them standing there. "Hey, cops, guess what I've got in the trunk of my car!" He was supremely happy...

It was close to midnight when he got home. He'd driven around rather aimlessly for a while, and then had had his dinner at another drive-in restaurant. Finally he'd watched a double-feature at a drive-in movie. He didn't worry about Lucy at all. If she had kept her mouth shut in front of her own house with a cop standing right next to the car, she wasn't going to give him any trouble anywhere else.

He shot the car into the driveway, past the garage doors that he always kept open. Then he got out, locked the garage doors, and went into the house through the back.

In the living room were his sister, his brother-in-law, and two cops.

"That's the guy," Sergeant Hallock said.

He was too surprised to be frightened. "Sure, I'm the guy you talked to this afternoon," he said, rather foolishly.

"We'd like to have another look at your car," Hallock said.

He stared at them stupidly. This couldn't be happening, he told himself. He felt the weight of the gun still in his pocket. He could reach for it, shoot it out with them, one against two. He wasn't a coward, he'd proved that this afternoon. But he didn't do it.

"How did you find me, Sergeant?" he asked. He was alert now, and really curious.

"When I decided I wanted to find you, I realized I remembered your license number. I guess I've got an automatic memory for those things. And I was standing right by it..."

"Yes." It was funny again somehow. "You were standing right by it, Sergeant. Well, come out to the garage. I'll show you."

He led them out and he opened the garage doors and then he opened the trunk for them. And he laughed out loud when they gasped at what they found in there.

He was still laughing when they handcuffed him and took his gun away from him and took him to the police car while the Sergeant radioed to headquarters.

"Yeah, Mrs. Roth," Sergeant Hallock said into the microphone. "She's alive. She just gouged her wrist with a piece of glass. Pocketbook mirror—broke it into slivers. And then she let the blood drip through the air holes this guy had drilled into the floor of the trunk. I saw the blood on the street when he drove away..."

It was then that he interrupted the Seregant and grabbed the mike, handcuffs and all, and shouted the most important part. "The guy that did this had real nerve. Put

her in the trunk and drove right up in front of the house and talked with the cops . . . a cop was standing with his foot right up on the back bumper of the car . . . right there beside her all the time . . ."

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Laura kept riding him, and riding him. Just because he was short? Couldn't drink much? Walked in a certain way?

The Wire Loop

BY STEVE HARBOR

KARL KRADER folded the newspaper and put it on the end table. "It's queer, all right. He kills the girls, but doesn't touch them otherwise. Either before or after. Evidently he gets his thrill just from the strangling."

His wife Laura turned her head to Norman Calmet. "Is that it, Norman? Is that how he gets his thrills?" Her gray eyes waited for him to speak.

Norman's small fingers drummed on the arm of the easy chair as he talked. "I'd hardly think so. He's killing something he hates and he'll do it over and over again until he's caught or finally decides he's even with the world."

Karl brushed a lock of blond hair from his forehead. "It's been ten days since the last one. Maybe he's finished killing now."

Norman Calmet was a small man of thirty-five with the neatness and primness of a man who hates germs and disorder. Usually he wore glasses, but it was a point of vanity with him not to when he spent an evening at Karl's house. He was beginning to get a headache, but he preferred that to looking owlish.

"I imagine he simply enjoys killing," Laura said.

"Perhaps he does," Norman said. "And perhaps he suffers terrible pangs of conscience."

Laura smiled at the thin stream of smoke from the cigarette she held. "That's remarkable. A conscience in a deviate."

Norman's moist fingers reached for his glass. "Well, I'd hardly call murder a deviation. Though technically I suppose you're right."

His eyes went to his carefully polished size six shoes and he felt the familiar waves of heat anger as Laura watched him. He brought the glass to his lips, wishing he were the kind of a man who could drink a lot without getting sick. He felt sure that liquor would help him to meet anyone's eyes.

"Perhaps he's been jilted by some girl," Laura said. "That could be possible, couldn't it, Normie? Or does he just hate women?"

"Evidently not all women," Karl said. "Just the small ones. Three high school girls, so far, and one office girl of nineteen. None of them weighed more than one ten."

Karl rose and began collecting the empty glasses. "He's been lucky so far. No one's even got a look at him."

"Someone terrifically strong, wouldn't you say so, Normie?" Laura asked.

Norman handed his glass to Karl. "Very little whiskey in mine."

"He didn't need any particular strength," Karl said. "He had a wire loop with some sort of a rod. All he had to do was to slip the noose over his victim's neck and twist the rod. It wouldn't take much muscle to do that."

He stopped in the doorway to the kitchen. "By the way, Laura, did you know that Norman's picked up a girl friend." He grinned. "About time too, Norman. You're not getting any younger." He disappeared into the kitchen and in a few moments they heard the clatter of glasses and the sound of the refrigerator door being opened.

Laura put her chin on the palm of her hand and studied Norman. "A girl? How nice. Is it an experiment?"

Norman turned on her, his voice soft, but angry. "Why do you talk to me like that?"

"Like what?" A smile flickered on her lips. "What's her name, Normie?"

Norman turned his eyes from

her. "Vivian Kirk. A student in one of my classes."

She smiled as she watched him. "I've been wondering about something, Normie. You don't have to continue teaching at the University now, do you? Not after all the money your father left you?"

"No, I don't," Norman said firmly. "But I want to."

"I see," Laura said. "And of course you wouldn't want to leave the friends you've made here. Isn't that it?"

At a quarter to ten, Norman rose to leave. Karl and Laura saw him to the door.

"Now be careful, Normie," Laura said. "Take the lighted streets. And be careful how you walk. The strangler might have bad eyesight."

Norman cursed softly as he walked away, conscious that Laura still watched him from the doorway. He tried controling his walk, making long manly strides, his body stiff against unnecessary motion. Turning the corner, he relaxed somewhat, falling back into the short mincing steps that were more natural to him.

At his morning ten o'clock class, Vivian Kirk, sitting at a desk in the front row, winked at him. She was a small girl with dark brown hair. Norman was quite aware that she was pretty, but he also regarded the temper lines near her eyes with some trepidation.

He fought down a flush of irritation. Damn the girl, he thought. Chemical Engineering is a man's subject. Why doesn't the girl leave me alone. But Norman knew why not and he wished almost sincerely that he had only his professor's salary to depend on.

All he really wanted from life was peace and the society of a few choice friends. And if it hadn't been for the whispers and smirks of the faculty members and the students, Norman thought that he still might have been able to keep her at arm's length. But he'd been unable to endure the talk, and finally had had to talk to Vivian, if for no other reason than to prove that he wasn't being frightened by a girl. Any girl.

He remembered the dates he'd had with her; the evenings spent in a movie theater, sitting rigid as Vivian put her hand on his and smiled, her teeth white and sharp in the semi-darkness of the theater.

Norman went through his lecture avoiding her eyes and when the bell rang, he gathered up his notes wearily and joined her in the hall. He wore his glasses.

"Hello, darling," she said, her eyes steady and her mouth smiling.

Norman glanced about self-consciously. "Hello, Vivian." He frowned ostentatiously at his watch. "I'm afraid I'll have to rush. I've an appointment in the cafeteria with Professor Krader."

Vivian lifted a knowing eye-

brow. "How tragic. I thought I might have lunch with you."

"I'm really sorry, Vivian, but this is awfully important."

She ran a hand over his cheek. "Of course, darling. I wouldn't want to keep you from your work. But you will see me tonight, won't you? Call for me at about seven."

Krader was downstairs at their table. Norman noticed that as usual the tables around Karl were occupied by Coeds. It was always that way, Norman reflected. Karl, tall and with broad shoulders, always attracted women.

"How's it going with Vivian?" Karl asked.

Norman carefully conveyed a spoon of soup to his mouth and swallowed. "Fine. I'm taking her out again tonight."

Karl let his eyes go around the room and he smiled at some of the girls. "Nice red-head in the corner," he said.

Norman kept his eyes on his food and said what was expected of him. "You really shouldn't notice things like that."

Karl shrugged his shoulders. "There's no harm in being friendly." He stirred his coffee. "By the way, what's this between you and my wife this last week or so? What I mean is why does she have it in for you?"

"I don't know," Norman said.

"The other day I told her about how you saved my life on Okinawa. She laughed about it."

Yes, Norman thought bitterly, she would laugh. How ridiculous. Normie in the army? And a hero too? You must be joking.

"Somehow she got the idea that you were a 4-F, or something," Karl said.

Norman looked up to find Karl staring darkly at a petite blond girl and a good-looking boy who took seats at a table near by. "Damn bitch," Karl muttered.

Norman called for Vivian at precisely seven-thirty. She met him outside the Sorority House dressed in a fluffy sweater and with a light coat thrown over her shoulders.

"They have a new 3-D at the State," Norman said. "Should be quite absorbing and I understand educational."

She took his arm. "Who wants to see a stuffy movie on a night like this."

Norman had no choice but to fall in step with her. They passed couples strolling arm in arm and Norman was certain they turned to watch him.

Vivian led him to a bench and they sat down. She examined him with disconcerting objectivity and her eyes reflected the moonlight. "You love me, don't you, darling," she said.

Norman felt panic rising within him.

"You do, don't you?" her voice was silk with a hard glowing sheen.

The thought of the irritating

smiling faculty members flashed through Norman's mind and he remembered the oblique taunts of Laura. "Of course, I do," he heard himself say defiantly. He was startled, but he repeated it experimentally. "Yes. I love you."

Vivian's smile was lazy and satisfied and Norman could feel a chill at the back of his neck. She moved closer to him. "Well?" she said. "Aren't you going to kiss me?"

Norman's arms went slowly and reluctantly around her. Their lips met for several seconds. Her lips were warm and in spite of himself he felt a strange excitement. He caressed her cheek, and his fingers slid down gradually just under her chin. Her throat was soft too, so soft, and he could feel the excitement growing.

He heard footsteps coming up the path and guiltily took away his hands. Vivian stood up and brushed her skirt. "I'm hungry," she said. "Let's go someplace where there are lights and people."

They began walking. "Lord how I hate that awful Chemistry," Vivian said. "I don't think I'm the type for college, do you Normie?"

By nine o'clock Vivian had developed her usual headache and Norman dropped her off at the Sorority house. He went away in a gloomy mood, following an aimless route until he found himself in the neighborhood of Karl Krader's house. He went slowly toward it and stood outside for a minute before going up the stairs and ringing the bell.

Laura answered the door. "Why, how nice to see you, Normie," she said. Her gray eyes glimmered with faint mockery.

Karl came out of the bathroom, lather on his face and holding a safety razor in one hand. Norman noticed the suppleness of Karl's arms, the smooth tan of his shoulders, and the perfectly tapered torso. He turned away and found that Laura was watching him with narrowed eyes.

"Sit down, Normie," Laura said. "I'll get you a drink. She spoke to Karl with an edge in her voice. "Go back into the bathroom and finish shaving."

Norman rested in an easy chair while Laura went into the kitchen to make the drink. He picked a magazine from the rack beside the chair and noticed that it was a physical culture publication. He leafed through the pages idly scanning the glossy photographs of nearly nude young men in poses emphasizing their shining oiled bodies.

Laura returned with the drink and Norman returned the magazine to the rack.

"Cigarette?" she asked. And then seemed to remember with a smile. "Oh, I forgot. You don't smoke, Normie."

Norman met her eyes tiredly.

"Sometimes Normie does smoke.

And he shaves too, just in case you were wondering." Karl came out of the bathroom stuffing his shirt into his trousers. He picked up his jacket and put it on. "Sorry to leave you, Norman. But I've got a department meeting tonight. I can't get out of it and I'm late as it is."

"But you'll stay, won't you, Normie?" Laura said. "Unless you're afraid to be here alone with me."

"Sure," Karl said, grinning. "The strangler hasn't been doing anything for some time now, and who knows, this might be his night."

"We'll protect each other, dear," Laura said. "If he breaks in, I'll fight him off while Normie phones for the police."

Karl went to the door. "But seriously, Laura, I don't want you to leave the house alone."

After he was gone Laura turned on the phonograph for quiet music. "I've been wondering about you and Karl," she said. "You've been friends all your life, haven't you?"

"Yes," Norman said. "All our lives and we went into the army together. They accepted me without hesitation."

They watched each other silently and then Laura rose and went to the closet. She returned with her coat. "I'm going to the drugstore for cigarettes," she said. She picked up a large handbag and waited. Norman got to his feet.

The moon glowed dully behind the scudding clouds and the streets were shadowed between the lonely street lamps. After they walked a block, Laura said, "I know that Karl is apparently more friendly with his Coeds than he should be."

"There's nothing to it," Norman said.

"I was quite disturbed by it at first. Considerably so. But not now. The truth gradually dawned on me that he really wasn't interested in girls at all. He was merely trying to show the world that he was something that he was not. He isn't interested in women, is he Normie?"

Norman's voice was low and controlled. "You really can't tell by the way a man looks, Laura. You can't tell it by the way they walk, or by their delicate manner. And quite a few of them do get married . . . for one reason or another. It must have been a surprise to you to find that out."

"In a way it's funny," Laura said. "I thought the real reason you came to the house was because you wanted to see me. I was flattered."

Norman shook his head sadly. "I may look like I'm one, Laura, but I'm not. And Karl is. And so we're friends, and only that."

Laura stopped. "I don't believe that. I still love him, Normie, and I don't believe what you're saying."

Norman looked deep into the darkness of the empty lot beside which they stood and then along the deserted street. This could be a place, he thought. A man could hide here and wait. Perhaps there would be a scream, but not if he were careful.

Norman heard the snap as Laura opened her purse, then dropped it. He bent down to pick it up.

"It's bad about those girls," Laura said, her voice above him. "But I didn't know then. I thought it was young women he wanted and I hated all of them."

Norman's head jerked back as the wire tightened around his neck. It cut deep into his flesh as Laura twisted the rod, and before the pain made him deaf to sound, he heard her low mad laughter.

FRED MORROW stood on the corner of 110th and Park and looked around. It was almost twenty-five years since he had so much as passed through this neighborhood and he marvelled at the changes that time had wrought. The houses themselves seemed to have degenerated from homes into rabbit warrens. He wrinkled his nose as he thought back to the squalor and filth of the buildings he had just gone through.

The vestibules were filthy, the

A Full-Length Novel

He repeated the words of a dying boy. From that moment on, his life was in jeopardy.

BY FRANK KANE

mailboxes had been pulled from the walls. The walls themselves had been covered with scribbled filth, accompanied in some instances by illustrations. The hallways were permeated with odors of foreign cooking, unwashed humanity and inadequate toilet facilities, odors that would be more appropriate in a dump than in a human habitat. But then, maybe, it wasn't so inappropriate at that. The neighborhood had become a dumping place for human refuse.

He checked his watch, saw that it was almost 4:40. He debated the advisibility of flagging down a cab instead of taking the bus. He decided a cab couldn't make any better progress in the stream of cars of all vintages that clogged the narrowed avenue, settled for the bus.

He studied the tide of pedestrians of all colors that ebbed and flowed the length of the avenue.

Suddenly, he had the impression his ears had clogged up. It couldn't be that, because he could still hear the roar of traffic. But it was as if a void, a tangible silence had settled on the street. The tide of walkers seemed to have been stopped, and what was trickling through was diverted around a small group that stood back against the buildings.

A thin, tall boy in a maroon satin jacket, across which was written in bold script "Black Aces" was struggling in the grip of two other youths, one light complexioned, the other dark, who stood on either side of him each holding an arm. A third stood facing him, his teeth gleaming in a grin.

Morrow had the impression of heavily oiled black hair, a pimply face with a scar that puckered the side of it. The third boy shuffled closer to the one being held by the other two. His arm flashed upward in three strokes, the boy in the maroon jacket reached up to his tiptoes, then seemed to sag in the grip of the two holding him.

When they released his arms, he slumped to the sidewalk, a loose bundle of arms and legs. The three stood over him for a moment, the scar-faced one contemptuously holding the blade of his switch knife for all to see. Then they sprinted for a nearby doorway.

It all happened so quickly, Fred Morrow stood rooted to the spot. By the time he had recovered, the three assailants had vanished, their victim lay squirming on the sidewalk. Morrow pushed his way through the small morbid circle that had formed. The boy lay on his back, his hands laced across his stomach in a futile effort to stem the red flood that was seeping through his fingers. Red-tinged bubbles formed and broke between his lips, as his eyes rolled from side to side.

Morrow went to his knees. "Are you hurt bad, boy?"

The pain-filled eyes stopped rolling. The boy was young, Morrow noticed, light-skinned, probably Puerto Rican. He nodded. "He cut me bad. Real bad."

"There'll be an ambulance along soon." He looked up into the sea of faces around him. "Anybody send for an ambulance?"

The boy groaned, his legs jerked spasmodically. "It was Big Step. He do the cutting. He—" His jaw sagged, a film glazed his eyes. His head rolled loosely to the side, a thin red stream ran from the corner of his mouth. The eyes stared unblinkingly ahead.

Morrow looked up at the crowd that was pushing closer to stare at Death. One of the women was blessing herself; the others just stared in morbid fascination.

"Well, don't just stand there," Morrow thundered at them. "This boy is dead. Get the police."

There was a rustle of movement on the outer perimeter of the crowd, a patrolman pushed his way through. He was tall. His face gleamed with perspiration; he was breathing heavily. "All right, get back. Give the boy some air," he snapped at the crowd. They shuffled back a few inches, inched forward again when he knelt at the side of the dead boy.

"Air won't do him any good now, officer," someone said. "He's dead."

The cop turned the boy's face, examined the sightless eyes, then nodded. He reached down, caught the cuff of the boy's sleeve between his thumb and forefinger, lifted the hand away from the wound.

Morrow had the feeling he was going to be sick. He stood up, looked away as the cop let the hand fall back.

The cop pushed his cap on the back of his head, tugged a dog-eared leather notebook from his hip pocket. He looked around the crowd. "All right, now. Who saw it happen?" His eyes hopscotched from face to face in the crowd. None spoke. They met his glance blandly, no one stepped forward.

"They did. All of them. They just stood there and let it happen," Morrow protested indignantly.

The cop grunted, wiped his damp forehead with his sleeve. "Not them. They don't see nothing. They don't hear nothing. They don't know nothing." He looked around again. "Anybody know this boy?" Again, the bland silence.

"Well, if they didn't see it, I did," Morrow growled.

The cop rolled his eyes back to Morrow's face, raised his eyebrows, seemed to be seeing him for the first time. Morrow was a few inches shorter than the cop, made up in girth what he lacked in height. He was hatless. His thinning hair was streaked with grey and had receded from his brow, leaving a freckled pate. His face

glinted with perspiration; anger had etched a white ring around his lips.

The cop brought a stub of pencil from his blouse pocket, wet the tip with his tongue. He flipped open the notebook, checked his watch and made a notation. "What was it you saw, mister?"

"There were three of them. Two of them held his hands while the other knifed him." He glared around at the faces that ringed them. "They saw it, too!"

"Three of them, huh?" The cop transferred the information to his notebook, looked up. "You don't live around here?"

Morrow shook his head.

"Then you wouldn't know who they were."

"One of them was Big Step. That's what the boy said before he died."

The cop drew his breath through his teeth, studied Morrow for a moment. "You're sure of that, mister?" Behind them the crowd started shuffling, muttering under its breath.

"Of course I'm sure. I was kneeling right alongside of him. He said it was Big Step who cut him."

The cop shrugged. "I'll have to have your name and address."

"Fred Morrow. 453 East Seventh Street, Brooklyn." He watched while the officer noted it in his book. "I was down looking over some houses a client of my firm owns. I was waiting here for the bus when it happened." He pointed to a doorway. "They ran in there after they killed him."

The cop wasted an incurious glance on the doorway. "That don't mean anything. They could go in there and come out a block away." He returned to his notes. "You're sure he said Big Step. You see the guy who used the knife?"

"Yes. He was facing me. He was young, sixteen or seventeen, dark. Had a scar alongside his mouth. Right about here." He touched his index finger to his cheek.

The cop looked up, nodded. Somewhere a siren moaned.

The cop flicked his notebook closed. "That'll be the Dolly Sisters," he grunted. "You better let them take you down to the house. The D.A. will probably want one of his boys to hear your story. Unless you change your mind."

"Why should I change my mind?"

The cop shrugged. "It's been known to happen."

A patrol car skidded to a stop at the curb, the crowd parted to make room for the newcomer. He was young, redheaded. He nodded to the other patrolman, glanced down at the body.

"There's a call in for the Harlem Hospital bus."

The other cop grunted. "Too late. This is a DOA."

The newcomer pursed his lips. "Too late to stop the bus now." His eyes flicked to Morrow. "Got anything on it?"

"Man here says he saw it happen." The first cop opened his book, flipped through the pages. "Was standing right here when it happened. Says the victim told him who did the cutting." His eyes rolled up from the book. "Big Step."

The redheaded cop raised his eyebrows, offered no comment.

"I think you'd beter have Dinty run him down to the house. The D.A.'s office will probably want to talk to him," the beat cop suggested.

"Okay." The redhead nodded for Morrow to follow him, pushed his way through the crowd. The faces that were turned to Morrow were sullen, unfriendly. They made no move to get out of his way, forced him to push his way through.

"It's a DOA," the redheaded cop told his partner. "Man here was a witness. Says he got the killer's name from the dead kid before he went out." He looked at Morrow. "He's willing to testify to it. That right, mister?"

Morrow nodded. "That's right.

The driver of the car shifted the toothpick he was chewing from the left side of his mouth to the right. "What name'd he give you, mister?"

"Big Step," Morrow told him. He watched the glance that passed between the two cops.

One of them said, "These spics've been spoiling for a real rumble and now they've got a good excuse."

The driver nodded, motioned Morrow into the car. "I'd better fill the skipper in. He may want to move some extra men in to break it up before they start chopping each other up. Not that it would be any great loss."

The redhead nodded, slammed the door behind Morrow. "I'll hold it down until you get back."

"Okay." The driver touched his siren, swung out into a hole in the traffic and headed downtown.

2.

Sol Robbins had been an ambitious, bright young boy just out of law school when he was tapped for the district attorney's staff. He envisioned a skyrocketing rise to prominence on the wings of publicity. Unfortunately, the only cases that had come his way had been routine, lacking in color or importance sufficient to warrant notice.

So—when he drew this case, he was determined to squeeze the last drop of publicity out of it.

Fred Morrow was sitting in a small cubbyhole office just off the squad room of the precinct house when Robbins arrived. The Assistant D.A. swung through the

squad room, waved a salute to a man he knew, walked into the office.

He shoved a moist, pudgy hand at Morrow. "I hope I didn't keep you waiting too long," he panted. "I got down here as soon as I got the flash."

Morrow nodded, swabbed at his moist face with a balled-up handkerchief. "I don't think there was any necessity for you to come all the way uptown, Mr—"

"Robbins. Sol Robbins." He walked around the desk, dropped into the chair. "Think nothing of it. I wanted to meet you personally." He picked up four sheets of typewritten paper, flicked through them, nodded his satisfaction at the signature on the fourth sheet. "They've got your statement all typed up, I see. Good. I can study it at my leisure. First, I'd like to hear the story from you first hand." He leaned back, tugged two cigars from his breast pocket, held one up to Morrow, drew a shake of the head. He bit the end off one, returned the other to his pocket. "Now, as I understand it, the dead boy—his name was Julio Rigas, incidentally—identified his killer to you?"

Morrow nodded. "He told me Big Step had knifed him."

Sol Robbins smiled, rolled the unlit cigar between thumb and forefinger in the middle of his lips. "You also saw the killer well enough to be able to identify him?"

"He was facing me when he stabbed the other boy. I wouldn't be very likely to forget his face."

"Very good, sir." The Assistant D.A. beamed his approval. "I want you to know that we all owe you a debt of gratitude for your public spiritedness in being willing to testify." He chewed on the cigar for a moment. "Do you have a family, Mr. Morrow?"

Morrow nodded. "A boy and a girl."

"We'll see to it that they have all the protection necessary until this matter is taken care of."

"Protection?" Morrow was uncomfortably aware of a cold finger of apprehension. "From what?"

Sol Robbins shrugged. "Just a routine gesture. Sometimes in a case like this, pressure is exerted to make a witness change his mind about testifying. We'll see to it that you're not bothered."

Morrow swabbed at his face again. "Maybe I ought to—"

Sol Robbins pulled the cigar from between his teeth. "There's only one way we can lick this lawlessness and that's for a few of us to be willing to stand up and fight." His eyes moved up from the cigar to the other man's face. "We can't afford to let ourselves be intimidated. All of us have got to be willing to make some sacrifice to make this city a safe place to live in. Am I right?"

Morrow nodded uncertainly. "I —I guess so, but—"

The man behind the desk pounded the desk with the flat of his hand. "Good. Then we'll depend on you." He replaced the cigar between his teeth, and chewed on it. "There are a couple of newspaper boys outside, I understand. I'd like you to meet them with me. All right?"

Morrow nodded. "I guess so."

The man behind the desk picked up the phone, pressed a button on its base. "Sergeant, you can let the press in now." He dropped the instrument back on its cradle, leaned back and laced his fingers at the back of his head. "If it's all right with you, I'll do the talking. I'm used to handling these boys."

Morrow nodded again, swabbed at his face.

The "boys" consisted of two wire service police reporters, a mannish looking female from the Standard and a scholarly looking young man in horn-rimmed glasses from the Advance. They filed into the room, nodded to Robbins and studied Morrow curiously.

"I've just finished interviewing Mr. Morrow, gentlemen—and ladies," he hastily amended. "We have a positive identification of the killer of Julio Rigas. The dead boy whispered his name to Mr. Morrow practically with his dying breath."

The mannish looking female fastened an embarrassingly direct stare on Fred Morrow. "I understand he was knifed three times through the stomach and hemorrhaged from the mouth. Yet he was able to tell you who killed him?"

"That's right," Robbins snapped.

"What's the matter with him? Can't he talk?"

Robbins colored slightly, started to retort, dug his teeth deeper into his cigar instead. He worked at a smile which didn't come off. "Of course." He turned to Morrow. "This is Fanny Lewis of the Standard, Mr. Morrow."

She turned back to Morrow. "Well?"

"I heard him, I saw the killer. He was a Negro. And I saw the two who held the boy for the killer."

"Even though you may not like our black brethren," the woman said, "you wouldn't deliberately swear one into the electric chair, would you?"

"Of course not," Morrow protested quickly. "I've got nothing against colored people."

Robbins gave Morrow an understanding smile. Then said, "We're all aware the Standard has very set editorial opinions maintaining that the District Attorney's office, the police department and practically everybody but the Standard discriminates against the Negro. Nonetheless, the fact remains that Mr. Morrow is performing a public service in cooperating with the police department in this matter and is deserv-

ing of more courtesy than is implied by Mrs. Lewis' question."

Fanny Lewis waited patiently until he finished, then, without giving any sign that she had heard, said to Morrow, "May I ask what you were doing in that part of town?"

"I was there on business."

The woman pursed her unpainted lips. "Oh, you don't mind doing business with them?"

"What do you mean, *them?* One of my firm's clients owns some property up there. I was looking it over for him."

"Pretty picture, wasn't it?" She fished a pencil and some folded copy paper from her bag. "What did you say your firm's name was?"

"I didn't say. And I don't intend to."

Fanny Lewis smiled at him sweetly. "We can find out, you know."

The AP man, a gray-haired veteran named Kiely grinned at Morrow. "Don't mind Fanny, Mr. Morrow. She sees an anti-Harlem plot in every thing that happens in or close to Harlem."

"You stay out of it, Kiely," the woman snapped at him. "You know damn well what they're trying to pull. The cops and the D.A.'s office have been getting hell about all these gang killings, so they've got to produce a killer. They get a guy who heard what was probably death rattles, put a name in his mouth until he thinks he heard it. So Harlem gets a bad name because it happened there."

"You try printing something like that, my friend, and you and your paper are going to find yourselves mixed up in the Goddamnedest lawsuit you ever ran into," Robbins roared at her. "I'm sick and tired of the way you start bleeding every time there's some trouble in Harlem. Talk about slanting evidence, you slant it so far it's almost on its back. This man doesn't care whether Big Step is white or black or in-between, merely that his—"

"Next election they might like to know that your boss appoints assistants who are violently prejudiced against the people whose skins—"

"Print whatever you like, but these are the facts. Three races mingle on the fringe of that area. Maybe four races—who knows how many. Today a young Puerto Rican was knifed to death on a crowded street. The police believe the knifing was the result of ill feeling between two gangs, the Black Aces and the Royal Knights. The dead boy was the war counsellor for the Black Aces and the police expect to announce at any moment the arrest of the killer who is believed to be a high ranking member of the Royal Knights." Robbins' eyes moved from face to face. "Mr. Morrow happened to be an eye witness to the killing, ran to the

aid of the knifed boy and was told by him the name of the killer. He was also able to describe the killer to the police. Any questions?"

Fanny Lewis grinned at him. "No names?"

Robbins ignored her and spoke to the group. "Please no. Not at least until the arrest has been made. I've given Mr. Morrow my word on that. Any other questions?"

"A killing like this could start a real all-out rumble. Are the police doing anything to control it?" the scholarly-looking man from the Advance wanted to know.

"I understand additional men are being assigned to the area, and the foot men are being equipped with helmets. The precinct captain assures me that every possible step is being taken to avoid any violence. We feel confident that as soon as the arrest is made, the feeling will die down."

"Why all the secrecy, Robby?" Fanny Lewis wanted to know.

"Because my office feels that a witness as important as Mr. Morrow should get all the protection we can give him."

The sinking feeling of apprehension was heavy again in Morrow's stomach. "Look, I'm not looking for any trouble. I saw a boy killed today and I thought it was my duty as a citizen to try and have his killer caught. I'm beginning to feel like I was the killer."

"You could be—if you finger an innocent man into the electric chair," Fanny Lewis snapped.

3.

The rooftop was dark. Big Step sat with his back against the parapet, his legs stretched out in front of him. The girl lay with her head in his lap, with only the occasional gleam of white teeth to betray her presence.

His hand idly fondled her bare, hard nippled breast. His mind was back to the afternoon. He was reliving the three sharp thrusts that had elevated him to top dog in the Royal Knights.

"You sure are mean," the girl purred. She took his hand from her breast, gnawed at the knuckle. "You sure cut that boy for good."

Big Step grinned. "He like to die before I even cut him." He caught her by the back of the neck, pulled her mouth up against him.

Her arms were around his neck, her fingers digging into his shoulders. The door to the roof swung open. A triangle of yellow light spilled out onto the roof, spread to where they sat locked together. Big Step pushed the girl away, his hand flashed for his pocket, came out with the bare blade of the switch knife.

A figure stood framed in the doorway. "Big Step," it whispered hoarsely. "You out here?"

"Who that?" Big Step's voice was low, harsh.

The figure in the doorway shuffled out onto the roof. "Me. Stud. Where you at?"

"Over here," Big Step growled. "How come you go busting in on me and Ruby, Stud? How come?"

"Trouble. Big Trouble." Stud stopped in front of where Ruby sat, stared at her for a moment. He was tall, thin. His clothes seemed sizes too big, hung loosely from his shoulders. "Cops come looking for you."

Big Step chuckled. "Cops always come looking for Big Step."

"It in the papers. A guy seen you."

"A hundred seen me. Everybody knows who did it. But them cops, they can't prove nothing."

Stud shook his head. "They got an ofay who talked. He tell the cops he seen you. He tell the cops the spic finger you before he die."

The girl caught Big Step's hand. "Make him go away, Big Step."

Big Step pulled his hand loose. "Who this guy that talked? Where he live?"

Stud shook his head. "It don't say."

Big Step raked his fingers through his hair. "You stayed there, Ruby. You seen who might finger me?"

The light highlighted the girl's tip-tilted breasts, the long, graceful legs, the softly curved thighs. Stud watched her hungrily as she tried to put her arms around Big Step, got pushed away.

"There was a man," she said. "He go away with the cops."

"We got to find him. We got to let him know what happens if'n he fingers Big Step. How we going to find him, Stud?"

Stud scratched his head.

Ruby said, "The cop know. He take his name and address down in his book. Why don't you ask him?"

Big Step stared at her for a moment, then his wide mouth split in a grin. "Which cop?"

"Hurley." She grinned maliciously. "You go ask Hurley, he crack your head."

Big Step scowled at the girl. "You mean that cop all the time sniffing round Mae's place?"

Ruby nodded. "He like her girls. She let him do more'n sniff around and he don' bother her business none."

Patrolman Everett Hurley (Badge 16462) stood in the shadows of a store front, cupped his cigarette in the palm of his hand. He smoked surreptitiously, flicked the butt toward the gutter. He straightened his cap over his eyes, buttoned the top button of his blouse. His wristwatch showed the time to be 10:50, with a little over an hour left to his tour.

He watched the thinned stream of people out walking, scanned the front stoops loaded with sweating

humanity. Across the street, a girl caught his eye. Her hair was cut in a provocative Italian gamin cut. When she walked, her full breasts strained against the thin fabric of her dress. As she passed the street light, he stared hungrily at the slow, languorous working of her hips against her skirt. He could tell from where he stood that she wore nothing under the dress.

He ambled down his side of the street, slightly to the rear of her. Near the corner, when she crossed the street, she almost ran into him.

"Hello." Her lips were thick, soft looking. Her teeth were even and white against the blackness of her skin. Her eyes were black and moist.

"What are you doing out alone?" Hurley wanted to know. He made no attempt to hide the fact that his eyes were taking inventory of her assets. "A pretty girl like you ought to be out on a date this time of night."

The smile faded, the girl pouted. "I got no man no more. We just bust up for good." She turned the full power of her eyes on him. "Besides he a runt. I like my men big and strong."

Hurley eyed her speculatively. "I'm a working man. And when I quit working I've got to go straight home."

Ruby pouted again. "That too bad. I don't like sitting on that roof alone. I get scared of the dark. And there ain't nobody come on that roof."

"What roof is that?"

"Down the street. Four house from the corner. Ain't nobody come on that roof a'tall." She grinned at him, swung away, walked down the street swinging her hips with an exaggerated motion.

Hurley stood watching hungrily until she disappeared into the entrance to the fourth house from the corner. He knew why no one ever went on that roof. The house had been condemned, its occupants forcibly moved out. In a matter of days wreckers would be tearing it down.

Slowly he walked down the block. When he came abreast of the fourth house from the corner, he stopped, looked casually around. Certainly, if a house were condemned, it was his duty to investigate who might be trespassing. He tried the door, found it unlocked. Inside, the vestibule was dark, redolent with nose-offending odors. The door to the hallway hung crazily from one hinge, half open. He walked in, felt his way cautiously to the stairs.

He was just about to test the first step, when an arm encircled his throat, cut off his wind. Two other arms pinned his arms to his side.

The first blow knocked his hat off, started bells ringing. He struggled feebly, was dimly aware

that the second blow had hammered him to his knees. The arm around his throat seemed to tighten; he could feel the perspiration break out in little bubbles on his forehead. Suddenly, there was a bright flash in the back of his head; his body went limp; he hit the floor face first.

The unconscious man didn't even feel it when Big Step brought back his foot and kicked him in the side of the head. From the cop's back pocket, Stud pulled the leather memo pad. Sam, who got down beside Stud, tugged away at the gun in the holster, couldn't get it loose.

"I want me this iron," Sam panted. "Then when them Black Aces come rumbling, bang-bang, they think I'm a cannon." He tugged again. "How come them cops let their gun get stuck?"

"That not stuck," Big Step growled. He reached over, stuck his thumb into the holster, eased the gun out. "That a special catch so's you can't steal no cop's gun."

Hurley moaned softly on the floor. Big Step lashed out again with the toe of his shoe. The moaning stopped.

"Let's get out of here," Big Step said.

4.

It was cool on the porch in Brooklyn. Fred Morrow sat in an old wicker armchair, sucked on his pet pipe as he finished telling his story. His wife, Ann, prematurely grey, and comfortably fat, had stopped rocking.

"I just happened to see the boy killed," he concluded, "and I saw the one who did it. That's all."

"They'll be after you," she said. You read every day what they do." Her voice was concerned.

"They don't know my name or anything." Fred knocked the dottle from his pipe, dug a pouch from his hip pocket. He dipped the bowl in, started packing with his index finger. "What could I do? I couldn't just stand by and let the killer get away with murder."

"They'll find your name. It wasn't your affair, Fred. Why should you get mixed up in it, and have them come looking for you? How about Gloria or Freddy? Maybe they'll take it out on them!"

"Stop worrying, Ann." He stuck the pipe between his teeth, scratched a wooden match. "The police will see to it that we're not bothered."

"The police!" She ran her fingers nervously through her hair. "Can they be with us every step? They've got other things on their minds."

Morrow touched the match to the tobacco, sucked a mouth full of smoke, exhaled noisily. "Look, Ann, you're always saying something should be done about all the killing and the maiming these teen-age gangs are doing. Right?"

"Yes, but not by you. That's what the police are for."

"The police are handcuffed unless the public helps. We've got to make an example of one of these killers and maybe the others will think twice." He ground his teeth on the pipestem. "It's not a pleasant thing to do, but it's my duty to do it, and I have to."

"But how about me and the kids? Is it fair to us to get a gang of murderers after us because you feel you have to do your duty? You weren't the only one on the street when it happened. Why didn't someone else step up and identify the killer? Why you?"

Morrow shrugged helplessly. "I don't know, Ann. Just because they don't doesn't say I shouldn't. The sooner these kids find out they're not beyond the law, the sooner decent people like you and me won't have to be afraid to stand up for their rights."

The woman dry washed her hands agitatedly. "I know, I know. But I can't help worrying. I wish you hadn't done it. I wish it hadn't been you."

"It's too late to wish now. I've already signed a statement giving the boy's name and his description. When they pick him up, I'll have to identify him." He blew a stream of murky white smoke at the ceiling. "They'll put him away where he can't do anybody any more harm."

"But he has friends. Those hoodlums travel in packs. You know that. His friends won't let you rest if you're the cause of him going to jail."

"Please, Ann. There's just no sense in arguing with me. It's too late to turn back now."

"You can refuse to identify him. Say you're not sure."

"And let him know we're knuckling down to him? Let him laugh at law and order with blood fresh on his hands?"

"What's the difference? At least they'll leave us alone. You can't bring the other boy back by sending this one to jail."

"Maybe not, but maybe we can save some other boy from getting what he got. Maybe our own boy. When they get so bold that they can commit a murder on a crowded street with no fear of being identified, then it's time we did something about it."

"But why do you have to elect yourself the hero? Don't you ever think of us, what will happen to us if anything happens to you?" She covered her eyes with her hand, fought back a sob. "Why did you have to get mixed up in it at all? Why?"

A wave of helplessness surged over him as he watched her shoulders heaving. He swore softly under his breath, got up from his chair, slid his arm around her shoulder.

"It'll be all right, Ann. You'll see. It'll be all right."

Later that night he lay in bed, stared at the dim smear of the ceiling above him. He was aware that in the other bed Ann too lay wide-eyed and sleepless. Both pretended to be sleeping.

The phone on the night table shrilled.

Morrow got up on his elbow, pulled on the night table lamp. The little clock on the stand showed two o'clock. He stared at the phone with a frown, looked over to where Ann lay, a knuckle between her teeth.

The phone continued to shrill.

"You'd better answer it. It'll wake the kids," she told him finally.

Morrow pulled the receiver off its hook. He held it to his ear.

"Hello?"

The voice on the other end was low, muffled. "Hello, Big Mouth."

"Who is this?" Morrow tried to keep the fear out of his voice. "Who do you want?"

"You, Big Mouth. I want you and I'm goin' get you. Good night, Big Mouth. Sleep tight."

The receiver clicked in his ear. Morrow tapped on the crossbar of the phone. "Hello, hello."

The metallic voice of the operator cut in. "What number are you calling?"

"Operator, I just got a phone call. Can you trace it for me? I want the party back. Please."

"I'm sorry. I must have the number."

"I see. All right. Thanks." He dropped the receiver back on its hook.

Ann had swung her feet from under the covers, sat on the side of her bed. The color had drained from her face, leaving it white and old. "It was them?"

He nodded.

"I knew it." There was resignation in her voice, an acceptance of what lay in store. "You thought they didn't know where to find you, but it didn't take them long. I knew it wouldn't."

"But how?" He shook his head bewilderedly. "The police promised. They said they'd protect us, that—"

Ann got up, walked to the window, looked out on the quiet Brooklyn Street below their window. She pulled the shade. "They might be out there right now. I told you they wouldn't let you do it. They'll never let us alone." She slid her feet into slippers, pulled a robe around her. He could hear the slippered feet slithering down the hall to the boy's room.

After what seemed a long time, she was back. She sat wearily on the side of her bed. "What are you going to do, Fred?"

He shook his head, sank his face into his hands. "I have to go ahead with it, Ann. You know that. I can't turn back now."

The second call came at three o'clock, the third at four.

After he hung up for the third

time, Fred Morrow dialed the telephone of Police Headquarters. He was routed through to the Detective Bureau of the East Harlem Division.

"Torno, speaking. Detective Bureau."

"This is Fred Morrow. I—I'm the witness in the killing of that boy in Harlem this afternoon."

There was a slight pause at the other end. "What can we do for you?"

"You've got to protect me. They've been calling me. Every hour on the hour. They've been threatening my wife and me, and my kids. You've got to protect us."

"Take it easy, Mr. Morrow. It may just be cranks."

Morrow shook his head. "It isn't. They mean business. They said they'll kill all of us. You promised they wouldn't get to me. You promised—"

The voice on the other end was soothing. "We didn't give out anything. It's probably somebody who knows you who thinks it's a real funny joke to throw a scare into you."

"They meant business."

A note of impatience came into the other voice. "How could they? You didn't give anything to anybody, did you?"

Morrow investigated the fine bristle along the point of his chin with the tips of his fingers. "No. I don't think—wait a minute, yes I did. That first cop where it happened—he took my name and address. Before he sent me to the precinct station. Yes. I remember now. He wrote it down."

"I see. Well, you get some sleep. I'll see to it that a guard is assigned to you and your family. Just get some sleep, we'll keep an eye on you."

"Thanks." He dropped the receiver back on the hook, walked over to the drawn shade on the window. He pulled it back, applied an eye to the side. The street was empty.

Ann sat on the side of the bed, speechless, white. She followed him with stricken eyes. "What did he say?"

"They'll give us protection."

She laughed bitterly. "They'll give us protection? How? Can they spend every minute with us? Can they sleep with us? Can they stop that phone from ringing?"

Morrow shook his head helplessly, dropped into a chair and stared at the clock. He was still staring at it when the hands showed five o'clock.

The telephone rang.

5.

Detective First Grade Marty Torno dropped his receiver back on its hook, glanced around the half empty bull pen, signalled down his partner. Torno was young, rangy. His face was sunburned a deep mahogany and when he

smiled, dimples cut deep white trenches in the tan. He picked up a report he was working on, dropped it into his top drawer.

His partner, Al Doyle, was an old timer. He affected a rumpled blue suit, a battered and stained gray fedora. An ever-present wad of chewing gum kept his jaws in perpetual motion. He had the long nose and inquisitive eyes of a real ferret. He ambled across the room in a flat-footed stride that bespoke many years of pounding the pavement before some spectacular police work had brought him into the Bureau.

"What's the squeal?" he wanted to know.

Torno stared up at him, frowned. "The guy who turned up as a witness in the knifing this afternoon. They're bothering him with phone calls."

"Cranks."

Torno shook his head. "He don't think so."

The man in the blue suit shrugged. "They never do. Some screwball gets their name and address—"

"It wasn't given out."

Doyle stared at his partner's face. "If they didn't give out the address, how would the mob find it?"

"You know Hurley, the cop that got himself mugged just before midnight? He was the cop on the beat where it happened."

Doyle pursed his lips, squeezed at his nostrils with thumb and forefinger. "He take the guy's name and address?"

Torno nodded. He picked up the phone, dialed a number. "Hello? Torno at the Detective Bureau. Put me through to the Property Clerk." While he waited he drummed on the edge of the desk, stared up at his partner. Then, "Torno, Lou. You got the stuff they took off the cop that got jumped on 110th?" He nodded. "His gun. Anything else?" He stared up at Doyle significantly, nodded. "Thanks, Lou." He dropped the receiver on its hook. "Two things missing, Al. His gun and his book—the book with the guy's name and address."

"What are you going to do?"

"Who's handling from the D.A.'s office?"

Doyle wrinkled his nose, shook his head. "It'll be on the sheet." He walked back to the little cubbyhole partitioned off for the lieutenant in charge. After a moment, he came out fingering a flimsy, walked back with it to Torno's desk. "Robby's got it. Sol Robbins." He flipped the report on the desk in front of his partner. "Now what?"

"I'll call Robby and tell him if he wants that witness delivered in court in one piece he better set up around-the-clock protection."

Doyle consulted his watch. "At this hour? You know what time it is?"

Torno grinned at him. "We're awake. Why should Robby sleep?"

In a few minutes he was out-

lining what had happened to a very sleepy assistant district attorney. When he explained how the address had gotten into Big Step's hands, Robby came wide awake.

"Thanks, Torno. I'll get in touch with downtown and have Morrow covered until we can lay our hands on Big Step."

Torno grinned at the mouthpiece glumly. "And then what happens?"

"What can we do? Put a guard on Morrow for the rest of his life?"

Torno dropped the receiver back on its hook. "What do you say we do a little calling, Al?"

"Any place in particular?"

Torno shrugged. "Just calling."

110th Street is a street that never goes to bed. The stream of strollers of early evening was now a dribble, but still there were continuous signs of life. Al Doyle drove the black department car slowly down the length of the street, his sharp little eyes flickering from side to side.

Tired little Puerto Rican girls shuffled their way homeward after a long hard night, their brightly colored clothes and heavy make-up scarecrowish in the early morning light. Finally, Doyle spotted a familiar figure, nudged his partner. The big car slid to an easy stop at the curb, near a man who stood leaning against a store front.

"Hey, Sugar," Doyle called softly.

The man in the shadows stiffened, seemed undecided whether or not to run.

"Come here, Sugar," Doyle called him. "I just want to talk to you."

The figure emerged from the shadows. He was short, fat. His black face shone in the light, he shuffled rather than walked.

"You hadn't ought to do this, Mr. Doyle," he complained. "It gives me a bad name they see me talking to a cop. You hadn't ought to do it."

Doyle pushed open the back door to the car. "Get in."

The black man's eyes rolled white. "I ain't done nothin', Mr. Doyle. You know that. I'm yoah frien'l. I ain't done nothin'."

"Get in. I want to talk to you."

The fat man slid into the back seat, got down low as the car picked up speed, headed west.

"I swear I clean, Mr. Doyle," Sugar protested. "I ain't done a thing."

"You hear about Hurley tonight?"

Sugar sucked a whistling breath through his teeth. "I don't know nothin'."

"Look, Sugar, we been pretty good to you. We let you operate a little bit. We never blow the whistle to the Feds on that powder you push. That right?" Torno swung around in his seat. "You want us to keep on being good to you?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Torno. Yes, sir. I sure do." He wiped the wet smear

of his lips with his sleeve. "But I'm tellin' it true. I don't know nothin' about Hurley."

Torno studied the man's face for a minute. "Where does Big Step hang out?"

The man in the back seat shook his head so vigorously, the jowls shook. "I don't know. Word o'God, I don't know."

"You better start levelling, Sugar. We know Big Step and the rest of his gang are hooked. And you're their source. Where does he pad down?"

Sugar continued to shake his head. "Not me, Mr. Torno. I take care of maybe a couple little girls who real dead beat after a hard night. Not them boys. No, sir, Mr. Torno. They real mean."

"Who's their source, Sugar?"

Sugar licked at his lips with a thick, fat tongue. His eyes flicked from one side of the car to the other, finally came to rest on Torno's face. "You'll protect me, Mr. Torno?"

"Sure," Torno grinned. "We wouldn't want anything to happen to you, Sugar. Would we, Al?"

"Where would we get our information?" Doyle said.

"You know Cozy Jacks?"

Torno nodded. "Guy runs the pool room over on Lexington?"

"That's the guy, Mr. Torno. He got a real shooting gallery back there. He got a real big high power trade, not a chicken push like poor Sugar."

"Big Step hang out there?"

Sugar wiped the streaming perspiration from his forehead and upper lip. "If'n Cozy ever heard who tipped you, I be a dead cat before morning."

"He won't know. Maybe with him out of business you can spread out."

"Thank you, Mr. Torno."

Torno nodded toward the curb. "We'll drop you here, Sugar."

The car pulled up to the curb, the rear door opened and the fat man scurried out. He headed for the building line, melted into the shadows. He waited there until the tail light of the sedan had blinked around the far corner. Then he started shuffling back to his regular stand.

6.

Fanny Lewis had no illusions about herself. She knew she was only a fair to middling reporter who drew the Harlem beat because she was tagged as a "bleeding heart nigger-lover" by the rest of the staff. She didn't resent it, because everybody on the staff who was anybody was a bleeding heart for some minority.

The Standard had once been an important paper in New York. Hidebound, ultra conservative, but important. But it never survived World War I and the revolution in morals and social customs. It staggered along during the late Twen-

ties and early Thirties, a dreary ghost of its once important self. Little by little the tight little band of ultra conservatives who were its *raison d'etre* died off leaving it with no support.

Then the business department started to scream. As revenue dropped off, so did the good staffers who could draw better pay elsewhere. And the Standard went on the block.

The new owners were faced with the dreary fact that there was no longer any reason for being for the Standard. The conservatives were ably represented by two papers, the liberals by two more and the middle of the roaders by still another. Advertisers could see no reason to stretch their too thin budgets to support still another.

But necessity is often the mother of inspiration. When Carleton Morris took over the Standard, he did it with the cold-blooded purpose of establishing himself and his wife as important figures in New York life. The project was an abject failure and he bowed out of active operation of the paper, turning it over to Leslie Hunt, his managing editor and former classmate, to be run as he saw fit.

It was then that inspiration entered the picture. Hunt decided to make his paper the mouthpiece and defender of minority groups, to such an extent it would make it seem the other papers bent over in maligning them. Fact was not important to Hunt. Whatever viewpoint the other papers took, The Standard took the other, whether it be defense or villification. The Negro was Leslie Hunt's best bet to attract attention. Particularly, with the desegregation uproar now headlining the news.

At first it had been a sorry experiment, but as months went by, the department stores and advertisers who had stayed away from the Standard in droves started to discover that the minorities not only had money to spend, but were rabid about supporting the paper that fought their battle so one-sidedly.

So, the outcasts and the Fifth Amendment fringe of journalism started to drift toward the one paper whose policy they could adopt. Fanny Lewis was the forefront of this contingent.

No person working for The Standard, no matter what mud they previously helped mould into the printed word, so epitomized the rabble-rousing sheet as Fanny. She *was* the paper. Fanny had been born in New Orleans of a mother who was part Spanish and part Negro and of a white father who deserted them when the third child arrived. Fanny was as Caucasian-looking as her father and perhaps that's why she hated him, and felt so sorry for herself and her mother. She never permitted herself to question what her feelings might have been had her mother disap-

peared. A big, homely, raw-boned, lonely woman lost between two worlds, she found herself vehemently forced to take the side of one or the other. When Hunt hired her, she knew she had found what she'd been seeking for nearly forty years.

Fanny was getting ready for bed when the desk called her.

"Better get on down to the hospital," the night editor on the city side grunted. "Cop on the beat at 110th got half his brains kicked out in an empty hallway."

She nodded, dropped the receiver on its hook, started to dress. She looked around the dingy flat dispiritedly, her eyes came to rest on the clock on the dresser. Almost one o'clock and Benjy hadn't even bothered to call.

She walked into the bathroom, dashed cold water into her face, examined herself in the mirror. She tucked a wisp of hair back over her ear with her finger, stared at the drawn, angular features that glared back at her.

The only reason he had married her was because she could support him. She knew that and everyone else knew it. And now all he did was use her money to spend on other women, every kind of woman. She wondered why she didn't leave him, why she didn't walk out and go back to living by herself.

The sound of a key in a lock brought her out of the bathroom. She rushed to the door, pulled it open. At least he was home!

Benjy Lewis was tall, broad-shouldered, very good-looking and nattily dressed. He was ebony-skinned, his teeth square and white. Tonight his eyes were sunken behind black puffy sacs, bloodshot and watery. His nose was flat, broad at the base; his lips were thick and loose.

He stared down at his wife's street dress, pushed her aside and closed the door after him. "Where you think you going, this hour o'night?"

"I just got a call from the paper, Benjy. I've got to go out on a story."

He walked over to a chair, dropped into it. "I need some money."

She stared at him. "More money? But Benjy—"

"I said I need more money." He pulled himself out of the chair, walked over and caught her by the shoulder. "Where you got it?"

She winced as the thick fingers dug into her shoulder. "I don't have any more money, Benjy. Honest, I don't."

He pushed her back roughly, picked her bag up from the table, rummaged through it. He came up with a few rumpled dollar bills. "Where's the rest?"

She shook her head. "That's all there is." She walked to the table, started putting back the contents of the bag. "What'd you do with the money I gave you tonight?"

He grinned at her. "I been spending it, Sugar."

She wrinkled her nose at the strong smell of gin on his breath, the smear of lipstick on his collar. "Who on?"

He didn't answer, made for the door. He looked back at her. "You better start getting more money, Sugar. A lot more. I can't hardly get by on what you bring home."

She started to protest; he waved her to silence.

"You can't afford me, they's lots of women can. Get that money."

He slammed the door behind him. She could hear him stamping down the stairs. She stared dry-eyed at the closed door for a moment, then followed him.

The door across the hall was open, a heavyset Negro woman stood in the doorway grinning at her. She knew. Everybody knew. The only way Fanny could keep him was to buy him. And they despised her almost as much as she despised herself.

On the bus, she saw the whole thing again, felt it as she always would feel it.

Elvira was a beautiful colored show-girl. Benjy had been Elvira's friend. Fanny met him for the first time one night years ago. She was overwhelmed by his good looks, his broad shoulders, by his animal magnetism. A man like this and Elvira, she thought, belong together. They look so *right* together. But by the end of the evening Fanny had learned that Benjy couldn't afford Elvira. And Benjy saw something he could use.

She married him because she had never had a man and needed one and knew she should have one. She had no regrets in her initiation to sex. Benjy was all that he seemed to be, and more. But he was what he was, and there were no illusions left by now. All that remained, and in themselves they were sufficient, were the occasional nights when Benjy remembered he was her husband. It came as no shock tonight to realize that the way things had been going lately she would have to bid still higher to keep him.

She got off the bus, headed up the long flight of stairs to the hospital entrance. A nurse in a freshly starched uniform sat behind a small reception desk in the lobby. Fanny Lewis moved across the highly polished floor.

"I'm Lewis of the Standard. Anything new on the cop they brought in tonight?"

The nurse looked up at her incuriously, pulled open a small card file. She checked through it, brought out a card. "Officer Hurley?"

"I guess that's him. How is he?"

"Condition serious. Hasn't regained consciousness. They have him in the operating room. You can wait on first-floor reception, if you like."

The reporter nodded curtly,

started down the long corridor to the reception room. A uniformed Negro policeman, whom she didn't know, two district men from the newspapers whom she did know and a taut-faced woman were in the room.

"Anything new?" Fanny greeted one of the reporters.

He shook his head, didn't raise his eyes from the paper-back he was reading. Fanny fumbled through her bag, found a rumpled cigarette, stuck it in the corner of her mouth. She touched a match to it, exhaled twin streams through her nostrils. She walked over to where the Negro patrolman sat twisting his uniform cap between his fingers.

"I'm Fanny Lewis," she told him. "From the Standard."

She was a little taken aback by the hostile look in his eyes. "There's nothing new yet. He's been in there over an hour," he told her.

"What happened?"

The cop shrugged. "We're not sure. He didn't check in at the end of his tour at midnight. We found him in a condemned house near the corner of 110th. Mugged."

Fanny stuck the cigarette in the corner of her mouth where it waggled when she talked. "What was he doing in there?"

The hostile look was more marked in the man's eyes. "He hasn't regained consciousness, so we don't know. When we find out, we'll tell you."

"Funny place for him to be, wasn't it?"

The woman who had been sitting silently, walked over. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Fanny Lewis looked the woman over insolently. She was nearing middle age, her face was prematurely lined, her hands big knuckled. "Who are you?"

"This is Mrs. Hurley, the officer's wife," the Negro cop told her.

Fanny shrugged. "I was just thinking it would be a funny place for him to be going—alone."

The other woman's lips split in a pitying smile. "I know who you are now. That paper. I heard all about you and your kind." She turned her back on the reporter and returned to her chair.

The color drained out of Fanny's face, she started to follow the older woman. The Negro cop caught her by the arm. "She has enough to do without having to slap you down," he told her in a hard voice.

"Who does she think she is?" Fanny raged. "Did you hear the way she talked to me?"

The cop nodded.

"You'd think I was dirt under her feet. Who is she that she can—"

The cop didn't raise his voice. "Leave her be. Suppose it were your husband?"

7.

The door to the room was closed,

the shades drawn. The sickly sweet smell of mezz perfumed the air. Ruby lay sprawled out on the unmade bed, her heavily lidded eyes following Big Step as he paced the small room.

Sitting in the corner, his back braced against the wall, Sam spun the cylinder of the Police Special he had taken from Hurley. He polished the long barrel on the leg of his pants then sighted down it.

"Hot damn," he grunted. "Them Aces come near me I blow a hole through 'em big enough you stick your head in."

Stud sat on the bottom of the bed, his eyes hungrily watching the soft rise and fall of the girl's breasts.

"When that Long Joe goin' get back with that car?" Big Step growled. He walked to the window, pulled back the shade, peered out.

He dropped the shade at the sound of the knock on the door. He motioned for Sam to cover the door with the gun, walked over and pulled it open. Long Joe scurried in, closed the door after him.

"I seen Cozy like you said. He say no soap on the car."

"Why not?"

Long Joe shrugged. "He say it crazy to go gunning cause they have your name. They know who if anything happen. That ofay seen it."

"He seen me, man," Big Step snarled. "He seen me real good."

Long Joe bared his teeth in a grin. "Sure, he seen you. But maybe when he see you again he say it ain't you he seen. If like Cozy say, you throw a little scare into him."

Big Step stared at him for a moment, comprehension dawning in his eyes. "That's a real gone cat, that Cozy. Real gone." He walked over to the bed, pushed Stud off and sat down. "We tell that ofay what happen to him and maybe his wife and kids. Then maybe he ain't got such a good memory, huh?

Long Joe nodded.

"Give me that cop's book again." He took the dog-eared notebook, flipped through the pages, stopped at the last page. "Fred Morrow," he read, "453 East Seventh Street, Brooklyn." He looked up. "What time is it, man?"

Sam consulted his watch. "Almost two."

Big Step nodded. "We take a little walk, do some telephoning." He motioned for Sam to come along. When Stud rose to follow, Big Step shook his head. "You stay here. She flying and I don't want her to get in no trouble where she might do some talking."

Sam cast an envious glance at Stud, followed Big Step and Long Joe out. As soon as the door had closed behind them, Stud walked to the window, held his eye to the shade, waited until they had gone down the steps.

He walked over to where the girl lay. Her heavy lidded eyes had difficulty focusing. He ran his hand up the soft curve of her thigh. She stirred and murmured. His mouth found hers, soft and wet. She snuggled against him. "Be nice to Ruby, Step," she murmured. "Be nice to Ruby . . ."

The Elite Billiard Parlor stared at the dwindling traffic along Lexington Avenue through two large, dusty, plateglass windows set in the second story of a five-story brick building. A yellow light spilled from the windows to the dark street below, a lettered sign advertised "Open All Night."

Big Step led the way up the stairs and into the big room beyond. Shaded lamps hanging from the ceiling spilled triangles of light over the green felt tables; the clicking of pool balls was constant and muted. A thin man in a sleeveless sweater was perched on a high stool behind the cash register and was watching a hot game on table one.

Big Step walked over to him. "Cozy busy?"

The man turned rheumy eyes on him, wiped the tip of his long, thin nose with the side of his index finger. He seemed to have difficulty recognizing Big Step.

"Yeah, he's busy."

Big Step scowled at him, motioned the other two to follow him as he swaggered to the telephone booth in the far corner of the room. While Long Joe laboriously looked up the telephone number of Fred Morrow on East Seventh Street in Brooklyn, Big Step kept his eyes glued on the entrance. The telephone booth was close enough to the escape hatch Cozy used for his shooting gallery upstairs, for him to make a fast break if he had to.

He dialed the number Long Joe took out of the phone book. He got a big charge out of the fear in the man's voice.

He called again at three o'clock. At four. And five.

He could tell by the sheer panic in the man's voice on the last call that he had him on the run.

He dug a cigarette from his shirt pocket, stuck it in the corner of his mouth. He shook Long Joe who had fallen asleep on one of the big armchairs, and was ready to lead the way out when they came in.

There were two of them. One was tall, young looking and mean. The other was an old guy in a wrinkled blue suit and a gray hat. Big Step had them figured the minute he saw them. They were cops.

He headed for the escape hatch, a doorway in the back of the room with Sam on his heels. Long Joe was still drowsing in the chair when they disappeared through it.

Across the room, Detective Marty Torno was showing the thin man in the sleeveless sweater

the muzzle of a snub-nosed .38.

"You push any buttons, friend, and you get a nice hole through your belly for resisting arrest." He watched while the thin man's finger froze inches from the button. "Come out from behind there."

The thin man skittered around the counter, came out into the open. "What is this, a stickup?"

"You know better than that, friend. Just an official visit, but we'd like it to be a surprise." He leaned over the counter, tugged the pushbutton loose from its wires. "Where's the gallery?"

"You gold?"

Torno shook his head. "No, we're not Fed. Just local. This is no raid. Where's the gallery?"

The thin man pointed to the rear of the room. "Upstairs."

"Show us," Torno urged. He followed the thin man to a concealed door set in the far wall. Beyond it a flight of stairs ran to the next floor. He wrinkled his nose at the familiar unpleasant smell of mezz, followed the thin man up the stairs. At the head of the stairs, a small landing was bordered by a railing.

A heavy dark blue drape had been hung across the doorway, effectively muffling all sound from the room beyond. Torno leaned over the railing, signalled to his partner by touching the tip of his index finger to the ball of his thumb. Doyle nodded.

"Okay, you. Downstairs," Torno whispered to the thin man. "And don't try anything fancy. My partner's a real nervous guy. Real nervous."

The thin man licked at his lips, nodded. He headed for the stairs, went down them swiftly.

Torno slid behind the heavy curtain, fumbled for the knob to the door. It turned easily in his hand. He pulled it open a crack, applied his eye to it. A cloud of heavily scented smoke rolled out at him, almost smothering him. He heard the soft moan of a saxophone, the thin whine of a clarinet supplemented by other instruments he couldn't identify. The music was wild, frenzied. He traced its source to an automatic phonograph in the corner.

The room itself was bathed in a subdued light; a heavy dark rug covered the floor. There was no furniture in the room, but a dozen or more men and women were sprawled around the floor. Some white, some black.

A tall blonde danced wildly in the middle of the floor, her hair flying, her body undulating in time with the music. Nobody was paying her much attention, although she was easily recognizable as a top line dancing star from a current Broadway show.

A slow cloud of sluggish smoke hung over the whole room, stirring lazily in the draft created by Torno's half opened door. He pushed the door wider, slid in. No-

body paid any attention to him as he walked around the room to another door at the far side. He stood outside it for a moment, pushed it open. It was a completely equipped shooting gallery, with needles soaking in alcohol, pads of cotton, all the necessary equipment.

He was looking around when suddenly a man appeared from a room beyond. The newcomer's eyes widened when he saw the man with the gun. His mouth opened and he let out one screech, "Raid!" but the menace of Torno's gun kept him frozen where he stood.

In the room behind there was a moment of shocked silence, then chaos broke loose as men and women alike rushed for the escape hatch. One moment the place was filled with starry-eyed couples, the next it was empty except for the moaning music of the phonograph —and the two men, one with the gun in his hand, the other with his eyes fixed on its muzzle.

"Take it easy, Cozy," Torno commanded. "You may have a lot of stuff around that puts you out of this world, but what I've got here could make it permanent."

Cozy Jacks licked at his lips. "I ain't goin' give no trouble, officer. I been up against the gun before. They ways of fixing it so's nobody got to have trouble. Ain't that right?"

Torno grinned. "Could be."

Cozy relaxed. "For a bad minute, you sure had me scared. I—"

"Im no Fed, Cozy. I'm local. You want out on this rap, you play with me. I'm looking for a punk named Big Step."

The black man licked his lips. "What makes you think I know him?"

"You must want trouble real bad. 'Cause I'm just the guy who can give it to you."

"You ain't Fed, you got no cause to give me trouble, mister." Cozy was beginning to feel sure of himself. "You ain't even got any call to come bustin' in here."

Torno grinned at him bleakly. He walked over to where the man stood, caught him by the front of his shirt, pulled him off balance. "Where is he?"

"I don't know who you talking about."

Torno's hand lashed out, knocked Cozy's face to the left, then he backhanded it into place. "You're his source. Where is he?"

Cozy started to retort, changed his mind. "I don't know. Honest. He don't come by hisself. He got a chick. She's real hooked. She come by."

"Who is she?"

Cozy licked at his lips, his eyes jumped around the room. "Ruby. Tha's all I know. Jus' Ruby."

Torno showed his teeth in a grin that didn't reach his eyes. "I'm looking for a good excuse to rough you up, Cozy. Keep talking and I'll forget you can't tell me what I want to know without teeth."

Cozy tried to meet his stare, dropped his eyes first. "She Ruby Steele. She a real gone chick. That Big Step he have her all for hisself in a room on 110th. Sixth house, third floor front."

"Sixth house, eh? Did you know a cop got mugged in the fourth house on that block?"

Cozy shrugged. "A man hears a lot of things, officer."

"Who did it?"

Cozy shook his head violently. "I don't hear that particular thing. I just hear this cop like girls. Maybe he followed one inside."

"Ruby?"

Cozy's face gleamed wet with perspiration. "She wouldn't be hard to follow." He watched Torno's expression anxiously. "Maybe you like—"

Torno's fist didn't travel more than a few inches. It caught Cozy on the side of the chin, drove him back against the table with the hypos and the set-ups. He crashed into it, hit the floor. He lay there in the wreckage blinking up at the detective.

"As soon as I hit the street, I'm tipping the Feds off to this setup. You better hit the road and keep going. Between the Feds and Big Step, when he hears you fingered him, this ain't going to be a very healthy neighborhood for you."

8.

Fred Morrow sat on the side of his bed, chain-lit a fresh cigarette from the inch-long butt which he added to the pile in the ashtray beside him. His face was gray and wan in the morning light.

Ann stood at the window, with her eye placed to the edge of the shade. On the street below, a broad-shouldered man in a fedora leaned against the front fender of a black sedan. Every so often he glanced upward at the second story window, then his gaze wandered from one end of the deserted street to the other. After awhile, he crossed the sidewalk, mounted the stoop and dropped into the big wicker armchair.

"Fred! He's leaving. The cop is leaving," Ann called.

He crossed the room, put his eye to the window, sought for the reassuring bulk of the plainclothesman.

"He couldn't leave. His car's there. Maybe he just went on the porch to sit down. He wouldn't leave his car there." He dropped the shade. "You better get some sleep, Ann. You haven't closed your eyes all night."

"How can I close my eyes when I don't know when I'm liable to have my throat cut?" she wailed. "And the kids, what are we going to do about them?"

Fred raked his fingers through his hair, dropped wearily on the side of the bed. "They'll be all right. Everything will be all right. You'll see." Nervously, his eyes

sought out the clock. It was over forty minutes since the phone had rung. He pulled his eyes away, couldn't shut out the slow ticking of the clock from his ears.

The phone jangled with such a suddenness that both the man and the woman jumped. She plucked at her lower lip with a trembling hand.

"Th-they're calling more often now. It—it's not an hour since—"

Morrow ran the back of his hand down his jowls, stared at the phone with stricken eyes. "I—I won't answer it. Let it ring."

"You can't, Fred. The kids. It will awaken the kids."

A faint twitch had developed below the man's left eye. He had difficulty controlling it. He looked from the phone to his wife and back. Then, he shrugged helplessly and lifted the receiver.

"Morrow?" It was a new voice.

"Can't you leave us alone? What are you trying to do to us?"

"This is Torno, Detective Division, East Harlem. I've got some good news for you. We've picked up Big Step."

Morrow was speechless for a second. "You're sure?"

"It's Big Step, all right. We picked him up a few minutes ago. The boys are talking to him in the squad room. He admits his identity."

"Did—did he admit the killing?"

Torno's laugh was low. "Not yet. They never do—at first."

"Will—will I have to identify him?"

"Maybe not. Depends on how sure he is of himself. I just thought I'd let you know so you could get a few hours' rest,"

Morrow nodded. "Thanks. Thanks a lot." He reached over, dropped the receiver on the hook. "They've got him."

Ann buried her face in her hands. "Thank God. Oh, thank God." She swayed gently. "It's been like a nightmare. Any minute I expected to see one of them coming through the window—" She broke off, stared at her husband. "They got him, but what about his friends? What about the others?"

"They're probably hiding. They know the cops mean business now." Some assurance was beginning to seep back into Morrow, warming the marrow of his bones like a stiff drink. "They're nothing but rats. Now that they know they can't get away with murder, they'll run and hide."

The woman walked to the window, pulled back the shade a bit, stared down into the street. "They didn't take away the cop. He's still down there."

Some of the assurance drained away. "Maybe they couldn't reach him. Maybe they're just letting him finish his tour. He goes off duty in a couple of hours."

The rest of the assurance drained out, leaving him limp and worn when the phone rang at six.

"They got Big Step. You know that mister?" the receiver told him. "They got Big Step and they expect you to finger him for them."

"Who is this?" he demanded weakly.

"Nem'mind that. I just figured you might like to know you ain't fingering nobody for nobody. You seen what happened to that spic yesterday. How you like somethin' like that, Mister Big Mouth? How you like that, eh?"

Cold perspiration broke out on Morrow's forehead and upper lip. "You wouldn't try anything like that," he blustered. "I signed a statement and you know it. Anything happens to me, and they'll have your friend for sure."

"Nothin' goin' to happen to you, mister. Nothin' at all. But how about your wife, mister? You got kids? Nothin' goin' to happen to you for sure. It's goin' to happen to them."

The phone clicked. Morrow sat holding a dead receiver to his ear.

"It was them?" It was more a flat statement than a question.

He looked up into his wife's face, nodded. "His friends. If I talk, they'll hit back through you and the kids." Morrow shook his head. "Things like that can't happen to us. Not in this country. These punks aren't God Almighty. They can't make their own laws and laugh at the whole world. They can't!"

"We could move," the woman said in a low voice. "We could just pick up and get out of here. Not let anybody know where we were."

The man looked around. "But this is our home, Ann. We've lived here over twenty years. Both the kids were born here."

"I don't want them to die here." There was a touch of incipient hysteria in her voice.

"But where can we go, Ann? Where can we go? I can't quit my job and leave everything we've worked for."

"What good is it, if we're afraid to turn around? If we never know when they're going to—"

Morrow shook his head. "We can't do it, Ann, they won't let us." He walked to the window, pulled the shade back, stared down at the black car at the curb. "We thought they put a man down there to keep anyone from getting in. Maybe they're keeping him there to keep anyone from getting out."

9.

Fred Morrow's children couldn't have been happier. Young Freddy felt like a conquering hero when the patrol car delivered him right to the school. He got out under the eyes of envious classmates, waved to the cop as the car pulled away. The joy was slightly tempered by the fact that Mr. Edwards, the gym teacher, came out and took him right into the principal's office. He

had to sit there until it was time for class and he couldn't mix with the rest of the gang out on the playground. But he had had that moment of triumph, and there would be another this afternoon when his police escort returned to pick him up.

His sister Gloria was also the object of envy by her classmates at Abraham Lincoln High. The cop assigned to escort her was young, couldn't have been over twenty-one by Gloria's fourteen-year-old figuring, and he was handsome. Besides, he just stood around and talked to her until it was time for her to go into classes. She didn't bother to explain what he was there for, hoped that some of her classmates might think it was a boy friend walking her to and from school.

Big Step sat huddled in a wooden chair on the far side of the desk. He glanced across at Torno, lifted the corner of his mouth in a snarl, looked away.

"A real tough cat," Torno grunted. "You ever hear one of those real tough ones crack, Al?"

Doyle nodded. "When they crack, they really crack. They sing like a stagestruck canary."

Big Step rolled his eyes up insolently. "Not me, cop. I got nothin' to sing about. You ain't got a thing on me. Not a thing."

"Let's find out." Torno turned to Doyle. "Take him down to Interrogation. I'll be right down, Al." He waited until his partner caught the manacled Big Step under the arm, led him through the door. Then he dialed a number. It rang several times before he got an answer.

"Larsen. Treasury."

"Swede, Marty Torno down at the Bureau. I got a hot one for you. A fully set-up shooting gallery."

The voice on the other end grunted. "Good. Got an address?"

Torno gave him the address on Lexington Avenue. "Name's Jacks, Cozy Jacks. Entrance is a door on the back wall of the Elite Billiard Parlor. We busted the place up a little getting some information, but we left enough for your boys."

"Thanks, Torno. We'll handle from here."

Torno dropped the receiver on its hook, turned off the lamp on his desk, headed for Interrogation.

Big Step lolled in a wooden chair in the center of the room, grinned at Al Doyle and two other plainclothesmen who ringed him in a semicircle.

"Go ahead, try beating it out of me," he jeered. "I'm under age. You know what that means? You can't lay a hand on me."

Torno nodded to the plainclothesmen. "I'll take him."

"He's a snotty little bastard, Marty. Just let me—" one of the plainclothesmen pleaded.

Torno shook his head, grinned

down at Big Step. "He only thinks he's a big man. Wait'll the stuff wears off and his stomach gets weak."

Smirking amusement drained from the boy's eyes, leaving his parted lips a caricature of a smile. "You better not slap me around, mister. I yell so loud even the mayor hear me. Yeah, and the newspapers, too."

Torno walked behind the chair, caught a handful of Big Step's hair, pulled his head back until the overhead light beat straight into his face. "Start yelling, you cop-mugging bastard."

"I know my rights. Just because I a black boy—"

Torno bared his teeth in a mirthless grin. "Pulling that won't do you any good. All you punks get the same dose—white, black, yellow or red."

Big Step licked at his lips. "You just talk big, Mister Man. You think you scare me with that kinda talk, don't you?"

"I hope you keep on being tough," Torno told him softly. He tugged down on the hair, brought water to Big Step's eyes. "You read the wrong comic books. There's plenty of ways of breaking a punk like you. And without leaving marks."

Big Step stared up at the detective, the first signs of fear beginning to show in his eyes.

"How about Hurley?" Torno asked.

Big Step's face was gleaming wetly under the light. "I don't know nothin' about no Hurley."

"How'd you get him into the hallway?"

Big Step licked at his lips. "I don't know what you're talkin' about, mister."

Torno released his grip on the hair, shoved Big Step's head forward. "You made a mistake on that one. If Hurley goes out, you don't stand a chance. Maybe for cutting the Spic, some soft-headed judge will settle for a murder two. But nobody's going to stand still for anything but the chair, if the cop dies."

"I don't know nothin'."

Torno brought a cigarette from his pocket, stuck it in the corner of his mouth, touched a match to it. "That's not what Cozy says."

Big Step folded his hands in his lap, stared down at them.

"Cozy says you used a girl to get Hurley into the hallway."

Big Step continued to stare at his hands.

Torno grabbed the hair, pulled the boy's head back, stuck his face inches away. "You wanted his book, didn't you? It had the address of the guy who was due to finger you for the cutting. That's why you tried to kill Hurley."

"I don't know nothin' about it," Big Step maintained.

Two hours later, Torno swabbed at his streaming forehead, swore at the wilted figure in the chair.

"He's a tough one to break," Doyle muttered. "But why get in a fever about it? Robby's on his way down here now with the witness."

"Morrow?"

Doyle nodded. "They're picking him up. Robby wants to sew it up good. He don't want anything to go wrong. So why should we sweat? He's going to grab all the credit anyhow."

Torno rolled down his sleeves, nodded to Doyle. "You're right. Let Robby do the work. Cuff him to the chair. I'll send a couple of boys in to make sure he don't cool off."

Outside in the bull pen Torno stopped at the first desk, where Connie Ryan was laboriously typing a report with one finger.

"Anything from the hospital on Hurley?"

Ryan shook his head. "They think it's a fracture. Bastards stomped him, looks like."

Torno growled in his throat. "We got the guy in the sweat box. I've been working him over. Want to keep him company awhile? Guy from the D.A.'s office is on his way over. Should be here pretty quick and I don't want the pigeon to cool off."

Ryan nodded. "Okay, Marty. This Morrow—he's a God-damned fool. Whatever happens to him he deserves. A white man shouldn't tangle with Harlem."

"Sometimes a guy talks too fast for his own good," Marty admitted. He sat down, laced his fingers behind his head. "Those neighborhood people didn't speak up because what the hell, one more spic dead—so what? But it's not whites and blacks, Connie. Let's say a Long Island Negro had seen it and his name went down in Hurley's book. Would Big Step be after him or not?"

Ryan shrugged and headed for Interrogation. Torno rubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands, swore under his breath. He had hoped to have Big Step broken and ready to sing by the time Robby arrived. A quick arrest and statement in a case like this could mean a lot, but now—hell, let Robby skim off all the credit.

He got up, walked over to where a water cooler was humming to itself near the window. Outside, the first signs of day had lightened the sky, painted the empty street gray.

A few minutes later, Sol Robbins skidded his car to a stop at the curb, pushed open the door. "Okay, Mr. Morrow. They'll have him ready for us."

Fred Morrow blinked red-rimmed eyes, shook his head uncertainly. "I don't know if I'm doing the right thing, Mr. Robbins. My family—"

Robbins took his arm. "Don't worry about your family. We're going to put this fellow where he can't harm anybody. Ever."

Morrow permitted himself to be guided from the car and across the sidewalk. The little Assistant D.A. kept up a happy chatter all the way up the stairs to the detective bull pen.

He pushed the door open, stuck his head in. "Torno around?"

Torno waved him in from his desk.

Robbins nodded for his witness to follow him into the big room. He walked down to where Torno sat, shook hands ceremoniously. "This is Mr. Morrow, Marty." He turned to Morrow. "Marty's the cop we've got to thank for such fast action."

Morrow shook hands. "H-how about his friends? Did you get them, too?"

Torno shook his head. "Not yet. We will."

"Morrow got a call at six from one of them. They're still trying to throw a scare into him." Robbins clapped Morrow on the shoulder. "But it'd take more than a couple of young punks to scare him off. Right, Fred?"

"I don't know. My family—"

"These punks do a lot of talking. Isn't that right, Marty?" Robbins appealed to the detective. "Ever know of a case where they made good their threats? I never did. I get 'em all the time."

"I wouldn't worry too much about 'em, Mr. Morrow," Torno said. "As soon as we nail this character for the cutting, he'll break. And that mob of his will forget him and you at the same time."

"I sure hope so."

The Assistant D.A. asked, "Where've you got him, Marty?"

"Interrogation. Connie Ryan's keeping him company."

"Might as well get it over with," Robbins said. "Okay with you, Mr. Morrow?"

"I guess so."

Robbins slapped him on the shoulder. "There's nothing to worry about. You just take a good look at him and tell us if he's the punk you saw knife the other kid."

Morrow nodded. "Then what happens?"

Robbins grinned. "Then it's my baby. We'll rush through an arraignment and an indictment. You'll be present, of course, to make the identification formally. After that, it's my job to put him in the Death House." He nodded to Torno. "Let's get it over with, Marty."

Big Step was still cuffed to the chair in the middle of the room. The bright light burned down mercilessly, rivulets of perspiration ran down the side of his face, dripped from the tip of his nose.

"You'll be able to see him," Torno explained, "but with that light in his face he can't see anything. I'll hold his face up for you, so just take your time. Okay?"

Morrow nodded.

They walked into the room,

Torno nodded to Ryan. "He do any talking, Connie?"

The plainclothesman shook his head. "He's pretty stubborn."

"It doesn't matter. This is the man who saw him cut the Spic. A positive identification from him is all we're going to need." Torno walked behind Big Step's chair, caught him by the hair, pulled his face up. "Take a good look, mister. Is this the punk you saw cut Julio Rigas?"

With a sinking feeling, Fred Morrow stared at the young face. He could see it again as its owner wielded the knife that turned the other boy into a bleeding rag doll sprawled on a sidewalk. In his ears he could hear the threats, the obscenities its owner had mouthed over the phone. He could smell the perspiration, sense the fear that permeated the room. In his mouth was the bitter taste of his own fear, his own cowardice.

"How about it?" Robbins had difficulty keeping the anxiety from his voice.

Fred Morrow took a deep breath. "It's him. That's the one I saw stab the other boy to death."

10.

Fanny Lewis walked into the City Room of the Standard. She made her way through the organized confusion of the desks. Men and women were sitting in front of typewriters of varying ages and vintages, punching out stories on the keys for the next edition.

She made her way up to the slot where two men were chopping copy, two others leaned back and stared with bored eyes around the room. A thin man with tired, baggy eyes, a green shade pulled low over his forehead sat at a desk apart, checking the opposition papers for follows, throwing the mutilated copy into a barrel-sized waste basket at his elbow.

He looked up with no show of enthusiasm as Fanny Lewis stopped at his desk. Bristles glinted whitely on his chin, the side of his mouth was discolored from the tobacco he chewed. He didn't like Fanny Lewis and she knew he didn't like her, any more than he liked working for the Standard with its taboos and bias.

Ken Flint had once been a top flight newsman. His by-line had been featured on the front pages of top dailies all over the country. When he was riding high, managing editors and publishers were willing to put up with his losing bouts with the bottle. But as time slowed his reflexes and alcohol dulled his perception, they became less and less understanding. Jobs became fewer and harder to find. Soon no paper in the city would touch him.

Except the Standard. Only the Standard would touch a newsman of Flint's reputation, because not a newspaperman of Flint's innate

ability would touch the Standard. But Ken Flint had found out that by-lines on clippings in manila envelopes in the basement morgues of even the best papers in the world are pretty thin fare. He swallowed his pride and permitted his new bosses to put him behind a desk where what was left of his genius could be used to sugarcoat their preachings into a semblance of news.

He stared at the plain, angular woman in front of him. He had to work with such as these, but he didn't have to like them. Or even pretend to.

"What's on your mind, Lewis?" he wanted to know.

"That cop. The one they found in that abandoned house uptown. He still hasn't recovered consciousness." She pulled some folded notes out of her bag. "Looks like he tried to take some girl in there and either her parents or her boy friend beat him up."

Flint curled his lip. "That's the way it looks, eh? The girl wouldn't have been a black one, by any chance?"

She looked up from her notes, tried to stare him down, dropped her eyes first. She hated herself, for not being able to stand up to this alcoholic wreck, but she couldn't face up to the disgust in his eyes. She went back to her notes.

"I also got a tip that they picked up a boy on suspicion in the Rigas stabbing during the night. I couldn't find out where they took him, but they've probably given him a bad time."

"You ought to see the other guy. He's in the morgue."

"You don't know this boy did it. Neither do the cops. They just needed a fall guy so they went out and grabbed the first kid they could lay their hands on. Just because he was a Negro, they—"

Flint reached over, pulled a page of typewritten copy from a spindle. "His name's Stepin Field. They call him Big Step, he's got a record as long as your arm." He flipped the paper at her. "D.A.'s office has a guy who saw the cutting—"

"I've already talked to that witness. I wouldn't take his word that today's Tuesday. He's obviously a Negro baiter and he wouldn't hesitate to swear away—"

"Save it for your story," Flint told her wearily. "I may have to turn those orations of yours into English for this rag's illiterates, but I don't have to listen to it."

Lewis' face was white with rage. "If the boss ever heard you talk about our readers like that—"

"He's heard me. He doesn't like me any better than you do. But he can't get anybody with a stomach as strong to work as cheap. And he feels the same way about our dear readers, so stop the crap and turn some out."

He watched her stalk back to

an unpainted desk near the wall. She slammed her bag on the desk top, yanked some copy paper from her basket. In a minute her typewriter was rattling the whole desk under the fury of her punching.

Slowly, the tempo of the city room changed. Copy boys who had been ambling between the desks, stopping to exchange jokes and gossip with the men and women sitting there drinking coffee from cardboard containers, were now scurrying with copy in one hand and galleys in the other. Cigarettes lay smoldering on the edges of the desks, burning down to add new service stripes on what was left of the varnish. The coffee became cold in the soggy containers.

The Standard was getting ready to go to bed with its daily impassioned defense of the downtrodden everywhere.

Later, the bus dropped Fanny Lewis a block from her home. She dragged weary feet down the street to her house, an old converted brownstone that nestled anonymously in a row of identical brownstones on the fringe area in the lower 100's. She wished they could move away from this neighborhood where whites intermingled with blacks harmoniously, but where she was uncomfortable in either camp. She dismissed the thought with the knowledge that it would be the same anyplace. She never told anyone what she was unless they asked her point blank; and then she took a fierce pride in saying she was a Negro.

Wearily she climbed the stairs. The door to her flat was unlocked. She pushed it open and walked in. Benjy's coat had been tossed carelessly onto a chair, dragged onto the floor. She picked it up, brushed it off. This suit had cost her $125 and deserved better treatment. She hung it carefully on the back of the chair, walked to the bedroom door.

At the open door, she froze. Benjy lay unclothed in the bed. Next to him was the naked body of a tall, full-blown blonde who looked like a chorus girl or a model.

Fury turned Fanny's entrails to water. She ran across the room, grabbed Benjy by the shoulder, turned him over. He woke to lay staring at her stupidly for a moment, then anger twisted his face. "What you think you're doin', pushin' me around like that?" He reached up, put the flat of his hand against her, sent her reeling backwards.

The girl at his side moaned softly, squirmed sensuously. She opened her eyes, stared at Fanny who stood glaring at her.

"Get her out of here, Benjy!" Fanny spat through clenched teeth. "Get her out or I'll throw her out!"

The girl in the bed grinned. "That dried up woman going to

throw me out, honey?" Her voice slurred from drink or dope, Fanny didn't know which.

Fanny went for her, her nails poised.

As Benjy watched, grinning, the girl in the bed laughed, rolled out of the way, sank her fingers into Fanny's wispy hair and pulled her down. They rolled off the bed onto the floor, biting, clawing. The blonde's youth made the difference. Her hand went up and down like a piston, each time connecting with the older woman's face with loud, sharp slaps.

Finally, the blonde stood up, magnificent, long-legged, high breasts heaving. Fanny lay on the floor moaning softly, her face buried in her hands.

Perspiration gleamed on the long flanks, the flat stomach, the lithe hips of the young girl. "Tell her, Benjy. Tell her how it's going to be," she panted.

Benjy, who had been enjoying the fight, reached for a cigarette. "This is Flora. She goin' to move in with us, Fanny."

The hands fell away from Fanny's face. She sat up, stared at Benjy with stricken eyes. "What do you mean she's going to move in with us?"

Benjy lit the cigarette, blew smoke at her. "You heard what I said. Flora, she's goin' move in with us." He reached over, pulled the gleaming body of the younger woman to him. "She got no place to stay so I thought she stay with us. Till she find a job anyhow."

Fanny pulled herself painfully to her feet. "If you think I'd ever let you get away with that—"

Benjy laughed at her. "I ain't gettin' away with anything. Just that Flora goin' stay with us." He made no attempt to hide the contempt in his eyes. "You don't like that, you jus' go ahead and move out. Flora stays."

Fanny's eyes hopscotched from her husband's grin to the smile on the face of the girl. "I wouldn't stay here for all the money in the world."

"You be back," Benjy told her. "You be back real soon."

She stared at him, then dropped her eyes. "Where could I sleep out there, Benjy? Where could I sleep?"

II.

Ruby sprawled on the unmade bed, watched the men from under half closed eyes. The lift from the last mezz was fading and she felt down.

Sam sat in his customary place on the floor, the wall supporting his back, polishing the Police Special with an old rag.

There was a soft knock on the door. Long Joe pulled the snub-nose .38, held it under the table. "Who that?"

"Stud."

Long Joe motioned for Sam to

open the door. Stud came in, set the bag full of coffee containers and buns on the table.

"You hear the radio?" he wanted to know.

"How we hear any radio?" Sam growled. "You know we ain't got no radio."

"That ofay, he goin' to put the finger on Big Step today, 'bout two 'clock. In front of a judge."

Ruby sat up on the bed, swung her legs over. "I thought you cats scare that man so he don't finger Big Step. I thought you give him a real big scare."

Long Joe shook his head, swore. "That man put the finger on him, that the end for Big Step. Maybe for us, too. They get Big Step, they come looking for us. They know he didn' do it alone."

Sam scratched at the side of his head with the muzzle of the Police Special. "Where this all goin' happen, Stud?"

"Courthouse. Why?"

Sam shrugged. "We gotta get Big Step out'n there."

Stud curled his lip contemptuously. "How you goin' get Big Step out? You goin' walk in that courthouse with your popgun and take him away from 'em cops? You musta been sniffin' Cozy's powder when no one's looking."

"Cozy ain't there no more. Feds knock him off." Sam paused for a moment, thinking." We gotta get Big Step out. An we don' need no gun to do it. That ofay got to finger him before they can hold him. Ain' 'at right?"

Stud started to deride, was waved to silence by Long Joe. "That's right, Sam. The ofay fingers him, Big Step's in trouble. He don' finger him, he ain't. But how we goin' fix it so's he don' finger him?"

Sam grinned. "We fix it."

Sol Robbins was walking on air. His boss, the Hon. Francis X. Corrigan, had personally spoken some kind words for the speed with which his office had arranged for the arraignment of the suspect in the widely publicized "Teen Age Murder Incorporated" killing. Corrigan, himself, had arranged for Judge Aaron Shapiro, a widely publicized foe of juvenile crime, to preside and plans were already under foot for widespread coverage by the press.

Sol Robbins already had visions of moving up into the number one assistant slot, with an office right next to Corrigan. All this on the wave of public applause, for a job well done.

He assigned Cliff Meyers, a former Police Department lieutenant, now attached to the district attorney's office, to the task of delivering Fred Morrow safely to the arraignment.

"Morrow's pretty skittish and scared stiff," Robbins told Cliff confidentially. "And he'd back out if he could. All we've got to do is

get him to stand up in front of Shapiro and finger this punk and we're in. Your job is to make sure he gets there. I'll do the rest."

Meyers had a shock of silvery white wavy hair, startlingly blue eyes, a glowing pink complexion. His constant smile, which exposed a complete set of porcelain jackets over his front central teeth, disguised the fact that in his heyday Cliff Meyers was one of the ablest strong-arm men attached to the Central Office Squad. The bulk of his shoulders indicated that he could still be a dangerous man in a knock-down, drag-out fight.

"He'll get there if my boys have to carry him piggyback. What time do you want him delivered?"

Robbins took a moment to think that over. "No later than two-fifteen. Don't get him there too early. Try shooting for around two, on the head."

Meyers nodded. "He'll be there."

Robbins slapped him on the shoulder. "I'm counting on you, Cliff. Frankly, our whole case hinges on his identification. If he backs out we haven't a thing to hold the punk on."

"He identified him this morning, you said."

The Assistant D.A. nodded. "Unofficially. I wanted to make sure there was no screw-up. I let him have a look at the punk in Interrogation. It's the right one, all right."

"So stop worrying. You don't think a handful of punk kids are going to stick their necks out trying to pull anything, do you?"

Robbins shook his head uncertainly. "I don't know. That's why I'm counting on you, Cliff. Those hopped-up kids, you can't figure from one minute to the next what they'll do. I think they're bluffing, but I'm taking no chances. Until I get my conviction, we carry this guy Morrow around on a silk pillow."

"And after that?"

Robbins shrugged. "What are we, his keepers? After that he's on his own. Strictly."

12.

Fred Morrow was apologetic when Cliff Meyers walked in.

"I've tried to talk her out of it, Mr. Meyers, but my wife insists on going along."

Cliff Meyers showed his porcelain jackets in a disarming grin. "Why not? How often does a citizen get an opportunity to get a ride in the District Attorney's own Cadillac? And get a front row seat when Judge Shapiro makes a speech?" He turned to Ann Morrow. "You get your hat, Mrs. Morrow. We'll wait for you."

"You're sure it's all right?" Fred Morrow sounded worried. "Mr. Robbins didn't say anything about Ann coming along."

"Take my word for it," Cliff winked. "It's okay."

In spite of herself, Ann felt a little twinge of pride as she walked down the porch steps to the big shiny Cadillac at the curb. She was aware of the tilted shades, the moving curtains on some of the houses, the franker curiosity of those who stood on their porches and watched her leave.

She had to admit that she enjoyed sinking back against the luxurious cushions, as the big car whisked her out Flatbush Avenue to the bridge. Traffic opened up for them as the driver touched his siren. She was comfortably aware of the two heavy set men in the front seat, of the quiet assurance and unquestioned capability of Cliff Meyers. She was beginning to wonder if maybe she hadn't been a little silly to try to talk Fred out of doing his duty.

Fred sat in the other corner of the back seat, watching traffic and houses fly by. He was wondering what they were saying back at the office. True, Lionel Simons, the big boss, had gotten on the phone and commended him for his public spirit in going through with this thing. He had even advised him to take a few days off. But he had sounded a little critical, when he asked Fred where the reporter for the Standard got the idea that he worked for an organization that was mulcting Negroes with substandard housing. He asked him to keep the firm's name out of the papers. Maybe that was the reason he told him not to hurry back to the office. Maybe he figured public curiosity would have died down by then. Silently, he cursed the reporter from the Standard and her bold-faced putting of words into his mouth. He resolved that if she had any questions today, he'd ignore her.

At the courthouse, the Cadillac pulled into a special garage. Cliff Meyers escorted them to a private elevator that took them directly to the second floor where the arraignment was scheduled.

Cut rate attorneys, anxious relatives, friends of those being arraigned milled around or held up the old, paint-peeled walls of the corridor. Cliff Meyers' experienced eyes ran over the crowd and he was relieved to note that, though he was ready for trouble, no one appeared to constitute a threat to his charge.

There were a half dozen Negroes interspersed in the crowd. Three he recognized as lawyers, one of them regarded as a criminal lawyer who thus far had failed to get the break he deserved; a fourth worked for a bondsman. The other two looked and acted like a young married couple.

As soon as the reporters spotted Meyers and his charge, they descended on him en masse.

"This the key witness, Cliff?" one of the picture snatchers asked.

"Take it easy, boys. Mr. Morrow can't talk now. Robby'll give you

a chance to get all the pictures you want after he comes out." He cut a fast path through the small group, parried questions as he ushered the Morrows into Courtroom B, ignored the groans of the press.

Inside the courtroom itself, there was a sprinkling of spectators in the rows of hard wooden seats directly behind the railed off portion. To the left of the inside portion, a few reporters sat fingering through the early editions of the afternoon papers. Fanny Lewis was among them and vaguely Fred Morrow wondered about her newspaper and how it manipulated facts and justice.

Sol Robbins was sitting at a long table near the front of the room. Judge Shapiro hadn't as yet made an appearance and the prisoner had not been brought up.

"We're a little early," Cliff Meyers grinned. "I guess the Judge had a long lunch. Suppose we go up front and sit with Robby."

Fred Morrow nodded. His wife said to him, "I wonder—" Ann looked a little embarrassed. "I wonder if I could go to the little girls' room."

"Sure. But I'd better go along with you," Cliff Meyers offered.

Ann looked perplexed.

"Not all the way," Cliff grinned. "I'll just walk down the hall with you, show you where it is."

It was almost a full minute before Fanny Lewis, the humiliation of the Flora incident bothering her, realized where they might be going and decided to follow. An interview with Mrs. Morrow, alone, with exactly the right questions posed, might be better than the account of what she had come here to report. She slid off the bench.

Cliff escorted Ann Morrow close to the door marked "Ladies" and stood there waiting. In a moment the corridor reporters and photographers were on him. Engaged in fending off their questions, turning good-naturedly to say "Nix" to a photographer who wanted to catch Cliff and the key witness' wife and the door with the "Ladies" on it in one overall shot, he did not see what had happened in the busy hallway.

Ruby had ambled over, turned the knob and walked in. The woman was standing in front of the mirror fixing her hat when the girl's face appeared in the mirror. Ann Morrow turned around.

When she saw the expression on Ruby's face, she started to scream. It came out a smothered moan as she tumbled backwards, fell against the basket for paper towels. Ruby moved in on her with a loaded handbag. She brought it down again and again on the head and face of the woman.

Ann could feel her senses reeling. She knew that only the arrival of someone could save her. She prayed that someone would

come. The warm wet feeling on the side of her face she knew to be blood. She tried to protect her head from the heavy blows of the bag, only half succeeded.

Ann was dimly aware that her prayer had been answered. She saw the hem of another dress, shoes, silk stockings in heavy shapeless legs. The scream that had been lodged in her throat broke out. She screamed again, and again . . .

Outside, Cliff Meyers cursed and sprinted for the door. He pulled it open, saw Ann's face—a mass of blood. Blood was pouring from her nose and lips and from cuts over her eyes and above the hairline.

He caught Ruby around the waist, slammed her back against the wall. She stood there, panting, glaring at him.

To Fanny Lewis, in the fore part of the crowd jamming the restroom door, he said, "What?" The question was loaded with hot anger, with threat. Fanny's eyes hopscotched from Meyers to the girl to the woman on the floor.

"She say dirty things to me. She want me to do things," Ruby snarled. "Go ahead, arrest me. I tell them everything. I tell the court what she want me to do. She a dike! A lady lover!"

Cliff Meyers stared at her open-mouthed. Then he said to the reporter, "All right, Lewis. You saw it. Walked in on it. What happened? Help a dirty little slut like this to ruin the name of a woman and her kids? Go ahead. It'll sell more copies of that filthy rag of yours."

Shocked at what she had walked in on, what she actually had been responsible for stopping, knowing the truth as this man knew it, Fanny Lewis gave no answer.

Meyers turned to Ruby. "You won't get away with this," he snarled. "I'll see that you don't."

The A.P. reporter kneeling on the floor, wiping some of the blood from Ann's face with a wet towel asked Ann, as he helped her to her feet, "What happened?"

Meyers pulled him away. "She can't talk now, boys. I've got to get this woman to a hospital."

"What about the girl?" the A.P. reporter wanted to know.

Ruby grinned at him insolently. "Lady lover. That what she is. Go ahead, Mr. Policeman. Arrest me. You do just that," she jeered. She spat at Ann. "I tell the whole world what she is. A dirty dike."

Ann caught Meyers by the sleeve. "Let her go. Don't make any more trouble. Let her go, let her go."

"Well?" Meyers' eyes fastened on Fanny's face. She felt the old familiar churning in her stomach at the look of revulsion in the man's eyes.

"You see?" Ruby said to the crowd. "Anybody get arrested, it better be her. Saying dirty things

to me." She pushed her way through the small crowd clogging the doorway. No one tried to stop her.

Inside Courtroom B, the arraignment was already under way. Sol Robbins got to his feet, brushed an imaginary piece of lint from his lapel as he marshaled his thoughts, approached the bench. Suavely, he outlined the charges on which the defendant was being held.

Judge Shapiro scowled ominously at the sound of the disturbance in the hall, fixed Fanny Lewis with a baleful glare as she found her way back to her seat in the press section. He motioned for a bailiff to go out into the hall and quiet the perpetrators of the disturbance. Then he nodded for Robbins to proceed.

"Your Honor, because of the frightening disregard for law and order exhibited by this defendant and because of the threats made against the person of an eye witness to this slaying, I move that permission be granted to have the suspect identified by the witness here and now."

"It's a little unusual," Judge Shapiro said, "but if that's the way you intend to nail down your indictment, it's all right with the court." He looked up as the bailiff returned. "What was all that noise?"

The bailiff walked up to the bench. "Some woman was attacked in the ladies' room, your Honor. She got beaten up real bad. Cliff Meyers from the D.A.'s office is taking her over to the hospital."

Judge Shapiro frowned, failed to see that the key witness had risen in his seat, and reluctantly permitted Sol Robbins to pull him him back down.

"Bring the suspect up to the bench, you men," the Judge ordered two uniformed patrolmen who stood on either side of the prisoner.

The night in jail had made Big Step look shrunken. His hair was mussed. His eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot.

"Will you stand, Mr. Morrow?" Robbins said. "Will you take a good look at this man? Is he the man you saw stab Julio Rigas to death?"

Fred Morrow stared at the prisoner in front of him. He felt hate rising in his throat like gall. He could see his wife lying on the rest room floor, her face smashed. He could see the body of Julio Rigas twitch as Big Step sadistically plunged the knife into it three times. He thought of his son and daughter, no longer free to play and walk around like other kids. He thought of the phone calls, the nightmare of night, the abuse and obscenity.

He said, "I never saw him before in my life."

a literary

BOMBSHELL!

MANHUNT, the magazine in your hands, is the largest-selling periodical in the crime-mystery-suspense field. MANHUNT sells more copies per month than *any* magazine of its type, anywhere. This record has been achieved because our success permits us to pay more to the important writer in our field, and permits us more editorial man-power to search constantly for the new, talented writer.

IN THIS ISSUE you will find stories told in the hard, fast-paced MANHUNT style by Jack Ritchie, De-Forbes, C. B. Gilford, Dan Sontup—names you well know—and Frank Kane.

FRANK KANE is no newcomer to MANHUNT but never before has he delivered such a literary bombshell as his full-length novel Key Witness. Here is a story of *today,* a story which few magazines would dare print. We consider it one of the hardest-hitting stories we have ever published. Start it—just start it—and see if you can put it aside!

IN FACT, start any story in this issue and see if you can put it aside. We think this is a particularly exciting issue of MANHUNT. More important, we hope you think so too.

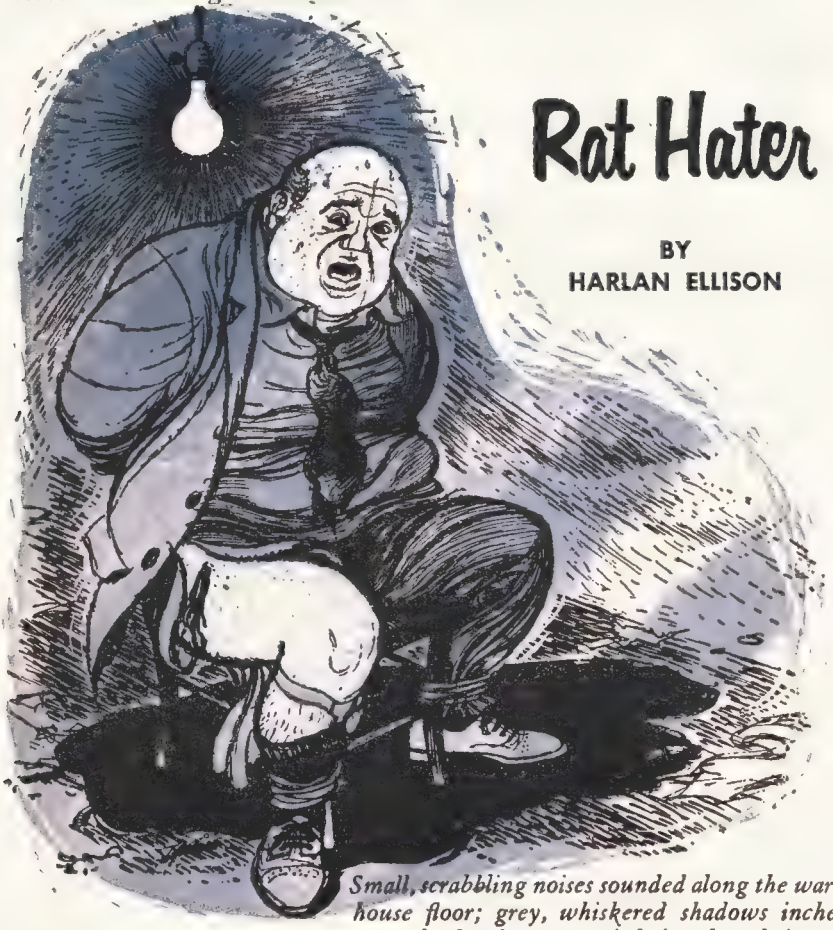
I HAD them bring Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld to me in the old steel pier warehouse.

Most people don't remember that warehouse, but back in the twenties it was one of the best in the city. Handled cargo, month in and month out, with no slack season. It was a good warehouse—far off where a scream couldn't be heard, and dirty—very dirty.

I remember the old steel pier warehouse. It was a bit of memory to me. It was the jump-off place for my sister. Well, she didn't actually jump; she was pushed. But it didn't make very much difference after it was done.

Rat Hater

BY
HARLAN ELLISON



Small, scrabbling noises sounded along the warehouse floor; grey, whiskered shadows inched toward the fat man tied in the chair . . .

Harry wouldn't like being brought by two cheap hoods, but then, he was in no position to complain. Eight years ago he might have been able to do something about it, but not now. Harry and the mob had fallen out; he was lucky they had let him live after the break.

Neither of the gunsels who brought Chuckling Harry to me knew the story. They were being paid and they didn't care. Money was money, and as Chuckling Harry used to point out to me—before he'd had my sister shot, weighted, and put in the harbor—business is undeniably business.

He was right, in a way. But revenge is revenge, too.

When they opened the seamed metal door and pushed Harry through, I was surprised at how much he'd changed. I just stared at him for a moment, hearing with another part of my senses the two gunsels bolting the door from the outside.

That didn't worry me, of course. I had a key I could use to get out—afterward. But right now, we were locked in together. The only thing that kept us apart—and it was a very real barrier—was the .45 I held in my left hand.

"Hello, Chuckling Harry," I said.

The back of one fat hand scrunched to his mouth. I'd never seen eyes quite that large before. Or skin quite that pasty-looking. But then, I'd never actually killed a man before. Harry'd never died before, either, which rather evened things.

"Lew. L-Lew Greenberg. Hi, Lew. How long's it been?" Chuckling Harry had always been a lousy bluff. He was stuttering and sweating; I expected him to slip and slide in his own wet in another minute.

"Well, Harry," I considered—the .45 up to my lips in thought—"it's been almost nine years. Right after the Christmas jobs. Oh, I'm sure you remember, Harry."

I sat down on a packing crate that creaked under me, though I don't weigh much, and crossed my legs.

"Oh, yeah, sure—sure! Now I remember, Lew. It's good—good to—uh—*see* you, Lew."

There was only one light in the warehouse. Right in the center of the space I'd cleared of garbage and boxes it cast a disc of yellow brilliance. All the rest of the place was shadowy dark. I'd fixed it up just for this.

Chuckling Harry made as if to rise, watching me carefully to see if I'd stop him. I didn't and he got up, brushing off his suit.

"That isn't a very expensive suit, Harry," I remarked.

He looked down at it, stretched over his paunch, as though seeing it for the very first time. "Oh, well . . . You know how it is, Lew. Wanted a suit in a hurry . . ."

"Did you go to one of the fat men's stores, Harry?"

He grew red, the blossoming of it making his dead white face all the whiter. He'd never liked being reminded he was an obese hulk.

"Fat man's store, hell! I got this uptown! Bought it at . . ." He started to continue, caught another short look at the automatic in my lap, and fell silent, licking his droopy lower lip with a pink tip of tongue.

"Bet that only ran about seventy bucks, Harry. Cheap. I remember the days you used to have thirty suits, all tailor-made, all over two hundred bucks each. Remember those days, Harry?"

He waved his blocky hands inadequately: "You know how things are, Lew. Times change. Why, in the old days, I was . . ." He ran down of his own accord, licking his lips again.

"Come on over and take a chair," I said, motioning to the lone straight-backed chair in the center of the circle of light. He moved toward it slowly, looking around.

"No one else, Harry," I said quietly.

He sat down in the chair, sliding a bit forward, allowing for his bulk. The round, saggy columns of his legs were placed far apart, supporting him. His buttocks drooped over the sides of the seat. I knew he was wondering what was going on.

He was still Chuckling Harry. He was still fat—I don't think anything could change that. Except, perhaps, death. But Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld had altered much since the day when I'd told him I had to quit the mob and find steadier employment to support my mother. Then he had been dynamic, powerful. Now he was tired and beaten. He was washed-up and washed-out. Harry was an old man at last.

He still had an almost monk-like circlet of white hair ringing his bald head; his eyes were still that fishy, watery blue; his face was still puffy and drooping with lard. Looking at him there in the chair, I could almost imagine the rosebud-pink lips forming the words they'd formed when I'd said goodbye.

So long, Lew. Here's a couple hundred, just to keep you going. No hard feelings about Sheila, of course!

Of course. He'd chuckled then, and handed me the two crisp hundred dollar bills, which I'd taken. Of course.

He wasn't chuckling now. He looked tired and unhappy, and getting more frightened as the seconds lost themselves.

"Wh-what are you doing these days, Lew?" he asked, toying with a pinkie ring on his right hand.

"I have a string of supermarkets, Harry," I answered, most amiably.

"Oh, yeah, yeah," he said, waving a pudgy hand in slow remembrance. "We heard about it around. Heard you were doing real well. Real well." He chuckled and licked his lips again, looking around, as though expecting someone else to add to the conversation.

The conversation was threatened by lag, and I certainly didn't want that to happen. "Do you see those ropes attached to the chair, Harry?" I asked, pointing to the thick cords with my gun.

A tic leaped in his right cheek, but he bent from the hips, looking at them. He didn't answer.

"I dislike asking you to do it, Harry," I said, politely, "but would you mind tying your feet quite securely."

"Say! What is this!" Harry shouted, almost leaping up. I waggled the gun. I ran a hand through my thinning hair, smiled at Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd tie your feet, Harry." I half-rose, the gun leveling as I did.

He looked at me once, quickly, seeing the big smile on my face and the big hole in the front of the automatic. He bent once more and began wrapping the thick ropes about his ankles. "Up higher, and tie them to the legs of the chair," I directed, seeking the most secure job.

By the time he was finished, perspiration had beaded his forehead, some of it running crookedly down his face, into the neck of his shirt. He straightened, wiping at his florid cheeks.

"Say, look, Lew, I don't know what this is all about, but I've got to get home. I don't know why you had those two guys grab me when I closed the shop, but I've got a kid waiting, and my wife holding dinner for me, and I've got to get back—"

I continued to smile. My nose itched, so I rubbed it slowly.

"You don't understand, Lew; I don't have time for fun tonight. The wife and kid are waiting and maybe some other other time, if you give me a call, we can get together . . ."

"Still the same wife, Harry?"

"Yeah, yeah," he answered, nervously, "still Helen. We got a kid now. Robert." He bit his lip, looking pained, and I could tell his eyes were saying, *I'm an old man now! Please leave me alone!* Yes, he was old, but some people hadn't gotten the chance to grow old.

"How old's your son, Harry?" I inquired conversationally. I was interested, truly.

"Seven." He answered me reluctantly, and I could tell he had lost his sense of hospitality. He wouldn't be much of a conversationalist from here on out. But of course it didn't matter.

I stood up. "Would you wrap your arms around the back of the chair, Harry. I'd like to—"

"Goddamit, what the hell is this? What do you want from me, Greenberg! No, I won't wrap—"

I'm afraid I lost my temper a bit. I grated the words really fine throwing them at him: "Get your lousy, stinking hands around the back of that chair, Harry, before I blow your guts out through your stinking fat back!"

It was the kind of talk Harry had always understood best. Slowly he slid his jelly-roll arms around the back, joining the fingers.

I picked up the coil of rope from behind the crate and walked over to him, tied his arms securely to the chair. I was surprised how much like baby's hands his own were. "It's been a long time since I've lost my temper. Forgive me, Harry?"

He didn't answer. I put the barrel of the gun at his ear. "Forgive me?" I asked again, most sincerely.

He bobbed his head. "Yeah, yeah, I forgive you, Lew." I finished tying him.

I went back to the packing crate. "So your son's seven now, is he?" I nodded my head in admiration. "Bet he's a cute little boy. Just like his pop," I added, smiling toward Chuckling Harry with my gun.

"How old would Sheila be now, Harry?" I asked, interested, though I knew, of course.

I could tell he understood what this was all about, suddenly. He became chalkier now. The blood drained away to invisibility. He shook; the chair clattered a bit on the cement floor.

"Look . . . Lew . . . that's all in the past . . . you wouldn't . . . I'm an honest guy now, Lew. I've been going straight . . . I'm sorry, Lew . . . she just found out a few things, and I couldn't chance having her around. She was too dangerous . . . you understand, *don't you, Lew?"*

He was bubbling, froth starting to ooze from a corner of his mouth. I didn't feel sorry for him.

"Do you still hate rats, Harry?" I asked, looking back over my shoulder at the dimness of the warehouse.

His head came up sharply; his nostrils quivered. "R-rats?" he said.

I almost laughed at the tremulousness of the word.

"Why, yes, Harry. Rats."

I remembered how he'd almost killed one of the fellows in the gang who'd wrapped a rat as a birthday present gag. How he'd taken special pains to live near the top of all buildings, so the chance of getting rodents would be smaller. The time he'd jellied into a heap, until three of the boys had killed a rat that ran across his path.

"Rats, Harry," I repeated, savoring the word.

"W-why? Why do you ask? Yeah, I suppose I still don't like

'em." He was squinting at me, licking his lips, really nervous.

"Do you have your wife clean real good, so the rats don't get into the cupboards, Harry? Do you call in the exterminators every year at the store, whether you need them or not? I'll bet you smack your kid if he laughs at a Mickey Mouse cartoon. Is that right, Harry, do you?" I'd spoken softly, but steadily.

"Why do you wanta know? *Why?*" The sweat glistened like bubbles on his face.

"This entire place is filled with them. See them? Hear them?"

His mouth gaped and his cheek drew up, revealing gritted teeth.

Some men fear high places, some fear closed places, some water. Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld feared rats. With an almost pathological fear. I wasn't going to just kill Harry—please credit me with more ingenuity than that—I was going to *kill* him!

"Rats, Harry! Large, black, crawling rats, with thin, wiry whiskers and little, pointed snouts, sniffing. They're all over the place, Harry! See them? See them, Harry?"

I had been talking quietly, but his head began snapping back and forth on his neck, as though he were on scent.

"No!" he oiled it out, "There aren't any. I don't see any. Lew, look, you got to—uh—let me go home now! Helen's waiting for me, Lew!" He was getting frantic, his voice was rising. But that didn't matter. The old steel pier warehouse is way down away from everything. No one would hear.

"How long do you think it will take them to eat through all that fat, Harry?"

"Lew!" he screamed, straining at his bonds. The chair clattered toward me, but I motioned him off with the gun. I could tell it hadn't completely sunk in yet. He still didn't believe I'd do it. Chuckling Harry has been known to be wrong.

"I wouldn't worry too much too soon, Harry. It'll take them at least three hours to finish you. They're pretty messy eaters." I smiled in a friendly way, then I shot him.

The .45 erupted, Harry screamed once at the pain, then spun around—still tied to the chair—and fell onto his back. There was a neat, round hole in his pant leg, and it was becoming stained dark very quickly. Blood was streaming out of his left leg. "It could have been a bit higher," I mused aloud.

I walked over and looked down at Harry. He'd fainted. Or perhaps it was just a state of shock. Either way, he was lying there, eyes shut, mouth half-open, tic in his cheek jumping. I shoved the gun into my pocket, bent down.

I lifted Harry and the chair. It was quite a job. In that half-

conscious shock state he was dead weight. Well, not exactly *dead,* but soon—soon.

I tipped the chair up, set it back on its legs, and brushed off my hands. That warehouse was filthy. They really should have taken better care of it.

I held the gun steady on Chuckling Harry while I fished the knife out of my pocket. I had to open the blade with my teeth. I suppose I could have gotten one of those push-button things, but I always seemed to identify them with those street kids and their killer instinct. Despicable!

I finally managed to open the blade. Harry's head was tipped back on his shoulders, the tongue protruding from his gummy lips just a bit. He was still in shock. I laid the automatic down, taking the fabric of his pant leg in my hand. I carefully slit it up past the thigh, letting the torn fabric fall away from the leg. The bullet had gone through the bone, just below the kneecap. It was a messy wound. I was willing to bet it would hurt Harry plenty when he woke up.

I brushed off my hands again, and my knees. The place was deep in garbage-leavings from hobos that had camped in there. That was good.

Just as I was going back to my packing crate, Harry began moaning, came to. His eyes snapped open and whipped back and forth around the warehouse. I knew all he could see were the dark corners; the shimmering, hanging cobwebs; the .45 and me.

"You've waited nearly nine years for this, Greenberg?" he asked. His eyes were glazed, but a sort of sanity seemed to come over him for a moment.

"For what, Harry? For the rats to eat your intestines out? That's very true, I have. It'll be fun. I'm not a vengeful man, as you know, but Sheila just wouldn't let me rest easily. She kept coming back again and again, Harry. I'll keep hearing that splash if I don't make some sort of gesture on her part."

He winced and moaned as the pain from his leg hit him. Harry licked his lips, turned his head from side to side. I've got to admit —he suffered. Then I took his mind off the leg. I said, "Rats, Harry? They're back there," I gestured toward a hollow scrabbling behind some crates. He drew back against the chair, struggling with the ropes that bound him.

"They're tight, Harry. You and I tied them, and we were old buddies, weren't we, Harry? Harry? Are you listening? Hear them scrabbling on the floor?"

I could tell he heard them. His face was a white balloon dotted with sick sweat. I knew he could hear them, because I could hear them. I felt for the plastic sack in my pocket.

The noise from the darkness was

beginning to mount. Tight, tiny squeals came from all around us. Occasionally a grey shadow leaped from one patch of black to another. They'd smelled the blood.

"They want you, Harry. Remember the days when we'd come down here to the waterfront, for collections, and you'd stay in the car till we brought you the take? You didn't like them, did you, Harry?"

I knew he was picturing the wharf rodents, fresh from the tramp steamers, tumbling over one another as they ripped apart a dead fish. Their clicking, vicious teeth leaving nothing of a bleeding gutter-mutt. The stench of them rooting in the grain bins and garbage piles.

I drew the plastic sack from my side pocket. I looked up and caught him staring at me. "You know what this is, Harry?" His eyes were dull, lifeless. The leg wound was pumping shiny rivulets of blood into his sock and shoe.

I ripped the tape from the mouth of the bag. Getting up, I drew out a wet, dripping piece of bread. It was brown and soggy. The smell overpowered me for a moment. I almost gagged. "Bread, Harry. Just bread. Dipped in chicken blood. My butcher was really surprised when I asked him to make up some of this, Harry. You should have seen his face."

I couldn't remember the butcher's face, suddenly. All I could see was Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld's. It wasn't pretty.

I moved around the warehouse, dropping the blood-soaked pieces of bread in dim corners, kicking the stuff into the darkness. One piece slid out of sight beneath a pile of broken timbers and an instant later I could hear them tearing at it.

"Lew! My God, Lew!" I turned around, where I stood in the darkness, looked at Harry in the center of the yellow circle. Suddenly he leaned forward, sweating like the pig he resembled.

"Lew, I've—I've saved some money from the old days! I—I can give you ten thousand if you'll let me go! I'll f-forget this whole thing, Lew! Please, Lew, forgive me!"

I'd never seen a man struggle so, sweat so, bite his lips so often. It was really something to watch.

I walked over to him. Looked down into the horror that stared from his eyes.

"Money, Harry? No, money doesn't mean anything to me now. I have a great deal of it. A fine home, a wife, two children—everything I missed when I was a kid, Harry. But I've got something more—something *you* don't have. I have a big hate, Harry. One that I've been nursing for—Oh! What's that? There's a rat, over there, behind that stack of bricks, isn't there, Harry?"

He was staring up at me, terror

swimming freely in his eyes. So I went on, "A *big* hate, Harry. I remember how you talked to one of the boys, telling him how Sheila had bled more than you thought one woman had any right to bleed. I remember overhearing you say she was still kicking when they dumped her. Right off the loading dock of this warehouse, wasn't it, Harry? *Wasn't it, Harry?*"

His eyes rolled up and for a second I thought he was going to have a heart attack, robbing me of the climax. My, but he was terrified.

"Getting weak, Harry?" I asked. "Wait till they come after you, Harry. Just wait. Rats, Harry, rats! Think of all that warm, bristly fur; think of all the fleas and death they're carrying. First they'll go for that bleeding leg, Harry; they'll get a whiff of all that gore and come running. Then the ripping starts. And after a while the pain will be so big you won't have to worry about the bullet in your leg. That'll be nice, won't it, Harry?"

I was going to continue, but the scream I'd seen building in him as I'd begun—broke.

He began kicking out, his feet still tied together, and making little mewling noises. His feet would get just a bit away from the chair, before the ropes stopped their movement. He seemed to be kicking at the rats, though they hadn't ventured this close yet.

But they would. Meals are too far apart on the wharves for them to pass up as juicy a one as Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld.

He screamed again. This one was a loud, bubbling thing that started deep in his stomach and rattled up. It was a real torment.

"Oh, stop, stop Harry," I begged him. "You don't want to frighten them off, do you?"

He didn't stop. In fact, he screamed louder. Now I could see the fingers of his bound hands clutching at the back of the chair. He was straining his quaking fat toward me, leaning forward as far as the ropes would allow. His legs writhed, his knees heaved, his body trembled.

He was looking past me in grotesque agony. I turned to see at what he was staring.

Then I saw the first one.

It was a little monster, with protruding teeth I knew were as sharp as a miniature guillotine blade. Beady, hateful red eyes glared out of the darkness. The tentative piping of its voice reached toward us.

A chill went through me. A terrible way to die.

"Lew, keep them off me! I can see them, Lew, I can *see* them!" Then he began a childlike blubbering. His fat body shook and heaved in the chair, tears oozed between his puffy eyelids, rolled down his cheeks, into the corners of his mouth.

"They're coming, Harry," I said.

They were back there—straining toward the fat in the chair. All I had to do was remove that source of fear—the light—and they'd be on him.

I started walking toward the seamed metal door. "They've smelled and eaten all that bloody bread, and they're hot now. They're stirred up, Harry," I told him, moving quickly. "They're hot and hungry and they smell a good meal."

His eyes were appealing, imploring, begging, calling me back to take him out of there.

"Lew! Please, dear God in Heaven, don't do this to me, don't —don't—"

It was interesting to listen to the changes in tone as his cries climbed higher and higher. I took the key from my pocket. He was bouncing on the chair, scraping and clattering in a very small circle. I moved out of the circle of light that held him, moved from its edges toward the door.

They were coming now, coming in full force. I could hear their claws scratching the stone floor. There must have been a thousand of them. More than I'd counted on. Harry could hear them, too. His eyes kept widening, widening!

I tried not to listen to his ravings from behind me, as I unlocked the door. I turned once to look at him—for the last time. He was still bulked huge on the chair, all the blood drained from his face, his teeth chattering. It was painful to see a man suffer as Chuckling Harry Kronfeld was suffering. I've always been a compassionate man.

"Lew!" he screamed. *"Lew! I didn't mean to do it! I didn't mean to hurt Sheila. I didn't mean it, Lew, so help me God!"*

I tried to believe him. Right then I wanted to believe him very much. I tried to think of her, as I stood there, just one year younger than me, and so pretty, so grown-up, all the fellows in the block beat each other up just to get a date with her. I tried to think how Harry had seen her one night when I'd brought her to a party he'd thrown. I tried to think how nice it would have been if Harry had married Sheila, even though Harry was a bit fat and a bit older than her. It would have been nice, even at that.

I tried to think of her blonde hair, and her tiny pixie figure, and her high, giggly laugh, and the way Harry had said her mouth was open when they'd dumped her with the tire chains around her slim ankles. How she'd taken in water at the mouth and nose, and sunk, before they'd even gotten a chance to hear her call out for her brother Lew.

"Lew, Lew, help me, Lew, don't let them at me!"

I took a final look at his dead-fish face. I clicked the lights off and went out the door. The dark-

ness fell in and was complete.

"Goodbye, Harry."

I found myself panting. My back was cold, yet perspiring. It hadn't been easy. I'd had to steel myself to do this. It hadn't been easy; in the instant before I'd shut the door, I'd seen them racing across the dirty floor, making for him.

I could hear his screams from inside the warehouse. They tore at me. The boys would have a real clean-up job when they came two days later.

I turned away then, and walked up the pier to my car. I could have stayed and watched through a window, I suppose. But I didn't really want to. That warehouse was filthy.

And I hate rats.

Thanks for the Drink, Mac

BY PHILIP WECK

He wouldn't be stalled. He shoved the rod into my back and said, "Get going, Eddie!"

A DRINK? Sure, I'll have a drink, Mac. I ain't changed that much. I'll always have a drink. Let's sit over here, where we can see the door. Bourbon and water, like old times.

Matter of fact, Mac, I ain't changed a whole lot. Not me. Still the same old Eddie. Play it smart, mind my own business, that's me. Only thing, no more cards. This is kind of cheap bourbon, Mac, but it's the best you can get in a crumby joint like this.

How's come no more cards? Where've I been? Well, I'll tell you, Mac, I just lit out. Got fed up to the gills on that stinking bunch of double-crossing sons, every one

of them, so I just lit out. Sure, I had a sweet thing going for me, managing Lefty's joint, that dirty rat, dealing a little, keeping my eye on the other boys. A nice thing, plenty of the green stuff. But I got fed up on it, that's all, on the double-crossing and the slop that was being tossed around, so I lit out and here I am. Like I said, it's cheap bourbon but you sort of get used to it.

How's Nervous John? Still around? Still a character? What a cat he was. Two years in Korea, two years in an Army hospital, and he still figures a package like that Joanie would sit on her can and wait for him. What a character.

Matter of fact, Mac, the day I lit out was the day he came back. No connection. It's just his coming back was what made me realize the kind of an outfit I was tied in with. I'll tell you about it if that stupid bar jerk ever gets here with another one.

Anyway, it was around three, four in the morning when he showed, this Nervous John. All the customers were gone and the boys were cleaning up and I went down to the back door to lock up. Pops was supposed to be on the back door. And he wasn't around.

Not a sign. His iron there on the little stool he used, the alarm switch closed like nothing was wrong, the alley door wide open for anybody to walk in. And no Pops.

Well, I eased into the alley, up against the wall. For all I knew, Pops had some tootsie out there; you remember how he was with the babes. I figured maybe I could catch him at it and have a little fun.

Only that wasn't it. A little ways down, back near that old warehouse, there was Pops, flat on his face. Out cold.

Somebody had clobbered him on the head.

I turned him over and saw he was still breathing and I'd just straightened up when I felt this rod in my back. Nervous John had sneaked up behind me and stuck his rod in my back, like I was a stranger.

It was a bad spot, all right. Four years he was away and I didn't know who he was coming after, what he had in mind, what kind of stories he'd been hearing.

Anyway, he said, "Okay, Eddie, take me in to him. Right upstairs into his office."

I felt a little better then cause I knew I wasn't it. This cat was after Lefty. Can you imagine it? Lefty. A punk like him gunning for Lefty.

I figured I'd stall a little and I said, "Whose office? Who you wanna see, John?"

He wasn't in no mood for stalling. He just shoved that rod further into my back and said, "Get going, Eddie! Move!"

I said, "He ain't in, John," and

he really wasn't. But John clobbered me anyway. On the back of the head.

Ever get a pistol butt on the back of your skull? First thing you know, your knees are giving out and you're falling. Things are getting black. Then you feel it, like an explosion inside your brain. Then you're down, like I was, right in the mud and the dirt with my two-hundred-dollar suit on, in all that filth beside Pops.

And your head really aches. I can feel it sometimes even today. That was the only time I was ever clobbered, but it does things to you. How about another drink? This bourbon ain't bad when you get used to it. Same thing for me.

Well, like I said, he clobbered me and he waited for me to get up and then he said, "Move it, Eddie. Right upstairs. I ain't taking no crap."

So I did. What else? Through the back door and up one flight to the main floor and then up to the balcony to Lefty's office. Sweating it out all the way. Maybe Big Louie would see me and tumble to the deal and start shooting. You know Big Louie. He'd shoot at anything and he didn't give a damn who he hit. Or maybe Pops would come to and Pops wasn't the kind of a guy to take a clobbering without a strong reaction. So naturally I sweated it out all the way into Lefty's office.

We got there all right, though. We walked in and I hit the light button and sat down behind Lefty's desk.

Like I'd told John, Lefty wasn't in.

I said, "Like I told you, John, he ain't in."

"Where is he?" John said. He still had that rod out, close to his jacket where he'd kind of hidden it on the way up. "Where is he?"

I said, "how the hell would I know?" And at the same time I kicked the switch with my foot, the one on the floor that turned on Lefty's tape recorder hidden inside the desk.

"Don't hand me that crap!" John yelled and he walked over and stuck that rod up against my temple. "Where is he?"

Listen, Mac, I been around. I been in the rackets more or less for ten, fifteen years, so I've seen plenty. But you get a rod slammed up against your temple and some jerk holding it, his guts all torn up over something, and it makes you so sick at the stomach, you can't move.

That tape recorder was grinding away, making the little noise it always made, like an elevator was running somewhere in the building, and I couldn't turn it off. I couldn't budge a muscle one tiny inch. My head was pounding and the back of it felt like mush where he'd clobbered me and there I was with that rod up against my temple and this crazy jerk yelling at me.

I tell you, Mac, that ain't no spot to be in. All I could do was say I didn't know where Lefty was.

"I'm going to kill him, Eddie," John said. "I'm going to kill him and it don't matter to me if I gotta kill a couple other bums first. Where is he?"

I said, "Look, John, if I knew I'd tell you. We used to be pals, didn't we? Honest, if I knew I'd tell you."

"I'm going to kill him," he said again. "I'm going to put a slug in his groin, where it really hurts, and I'm going to jab one of his eyes out with my thumb, and I'm going to slice open his gut and let him die slow and painful. Where is he?"

Can you imagine it? A punk like Nervous John. Figuring out all them things he was going to do to Lefty. What did he think, everybody would sit around and let him do it? He was crazy. He wouldn't live ten minutes.

I told him. I said, "You're crazy, John, gunning for a man like Lefty. You ain't got a chance. Even if you do get him, you won't live ten minutes."

He moved the gun and he turned around and sat down in a chair.

"What the hell do I care if I don't live ten minutes!" he yelled. "I'm going to kill that son!"

For a minute he was quiet. Then he asked, "You seen Joanie lately?"

Can you imagine it? Gunning for a man like Lefty, over a babe? Especially a drunken bum like Joanie had turned into, a cheap little streetwalker? What a character this Nervous John was.

Women are all right, you get your kicks out of them. But go gunning for a man like Lefty over a babe? No, sir. No babe is worth a knife in the belly to me.

But this was Nervous John, not me.

He said, "You seen her lately, Eddie?"

Well, I hadn't, not for five, six months. I said, "No, I ain't. Not for five, six months, John."

"I did," he said. "I seen her today."

"What did she tell you?"

"She didn't tell me nothing, Eddie. Not a word. She didn't have to. I know who's responsible."

He got up again on his feet and he said, "I'm going to kill that rotten, stinking son! I'm going to open his guts up! And you're going to help me, Eddie!"

I said, "Honest to God, I don't know where he is!"

He said, "Then let's go looking for him, Eddie. You and me. You ought to know where he hangs out. Come on, Eddie, let's go!"

And he stuck that gun in my temple again.

So what was I going to do? Sit there and wait for him to clobber me again. Or pull that trigger? Not me, Mac. My head was soft already from one clobbering. I got up and I went with him.

"How about the poolroom, Eddie?" Nervous John asked. "Does he still hang out in the poolroom?"

I said, "Sometimes."

So that was where we went first, to the Acropolis Poolroom around the corner. Walking out of Lefty's office, with the lights still on and the tape recorder still grinding.

How about another drink, Mac? You talk so long, your throat gets dry. I ain't used to talking much. Never was. You know me, Mac. Yeah, same thing. That's all I drink these days.

Well, anyway, they had a dice game going in the Acropolis, like always, a pretty big game. Lefty wasn't there. I didn't figure he would be. But I was kind of nervous anyway, hitting that joint. You see, big Stew Marcolis ran the place, you remember him, him and Nervous John was good pals before John got hitched and went in the service.

And in a way, you know, Stew was the guy who brought this Joanie babe around. Over to the club or in the bar maybe once a week or so while John was away. The boys see a babe like that, nice figure, big eyes, they see her with some other character and they know her husband's not around, they figure, well, here's something all set up. All you gotta do is just move in. And it looks like it ought'a be good. I understand Stew wasn't getting any himself, but you know how the boys figure.

Well, that's how it happened, see, Stew bringing her around and all the boys trying to move in. This Joanie, she played it dumb. It took a lot of cash working on her, setting up a phony dice game, presents for her old lady, you know. She could've had all that cash herself if she'd put a price on it right off, she was that nice-looking, but she was too damn dumb. Some babes. What happened to that drink? This here bartender, Mac, he's for the birds. Strictly for the birds.

What I mean, Mac, is I figured maybe this Nervous John knew Stew started the thing and the lead would fly and when lead flies you just don't want to be around. Besides, me walking in with John, maybe somebody would get the idea I was fingering Stew and you never know, even characters like that, they got friends. Here's the bartender now. Hey, Joe, get the lead out, will you?

But it seems like Stew wasn't there either, or Lefty, just some of the boys with the dice.

We asked them where was Lefty, but nobody cracked. Nervous John watched the game a bit, then he nudged me with the rod in his pocket and we went outside.

"Where do we go now, Eddie?" he asked.

I said, "Beats the hell outta me, John."

Right there, you know, you

could see he was kind of weakening. I was expecting him to clobber me again; that's what I would've done. You don't get information out of nobody just asking, not in a spot like that.

But not John. He slammed me against the wall with his left hand, his right hand in his pocket on the rod. Maybe he slapped me a couple times, I don't remember too clear. My head was still soft and my legs shaky and hell, this happened two years ago, Mac.

Anyway, I said that maybe Lefty was in the High Tail. So we hiked over there and it was a mistake, Mac. I sweated it out there, too, account it was in the High Tail this Joanie used to put on the dances. You know the kind.

This Joanie, like I say, she was sure dumb. She wasn't happy just moving into a guy's apartment, she says she wants to work, so somebody sets her up to be a dancer in the High Tail, only nobody tells her about the little shows they put on for the boys after the joint's closed to the public.

Just to show how dumb the babe was, well, the boys get kind of rough one night account of she wasn't going for a full strip, much less the stuff the other babes done. They therefore sort of took her clothes off of her.

And you know what that dumb dame done? She blew the whistle. Next day she ran down to the station. It cost fifty extra to the desk sergeant on account of that dumb trick and her not knowing Lefty and hi boys had the cops in their back pocket.

Anyway, that's why I was sweating it out. You never know, maybe Nervous John heard about it and some of the boys who was in on the joke might be around.

But they wasn't. Them or Lefty either. This here joint, they sure serve you small drinks, don't they? I bet it ain't more'n three-quarters of an ounce. Lemme call the bartender again, or ain't you ready yet?

Like I said, nobody was there in the High Tail except the character behind the bar. So Nervous John and me, we had a drink. You can't just walk into that back room after hours and walk out without one drink, anyway. We had it and we asked if Lefty'd been around and he hadn't.

This Nervous John, he's leaning against me with that rod and he said, "Eddie, you wouldn't give an old pal the runaround, would you, especially an old pal who's going to put a slug in your gut if you are?"

Me, I didn't want to get clobbered again. I said, "Not me, I don't want to get clobbered again, John."

"Where is he, Eddie?" this character said.

You finished, yet, Mac? No? You're slowing up in your old age, Mac. No offense, I don't mean

really old. You know what I mean, Mac.

Well, John said, "Where is he, Eddie?" meaning Lefty, and I figured it was time for word to have spread so I said, "Maybe he's back at the club. Sometimes he sleeps there all night." So we hiked it over to the club.

Of course, I had to sweat that out, too, account I don't know if maybe we'll see Big Louie anywhere before we get into the office. And I don't know how much this Nervous John heard. Big Louie was the one pushed her around. Not bad; he didn't really hurt her. It's just that she put up a fight and he had to. The dumb babe. She should've known a guy, Lefty or any guy, gets tired of anything sooner or later, especially with her going in for those full strips after her first experience, and with her hitting the bottle kind of heavy, too. She should've known a guy's going to say to one of his boys, just to keep him in line, sure, help yourself. Especially when Big Louie walked in with the key, she should've known. But the dumb bunny, she put up a fight and she got pushed around a bit, a couple teeth knocked out.

So I had to sweat that out, too, maybe we'd run into Big Louie on the way.

But I guess this Nervous John, he didn't hear too much. While we were walking, he said, "You ain't seen her lately, eh, Eddie?"

I ain't seen her much since that night Big Louie mussed her up. I heard she'd turned into a lush, walking the streets. But I didn't tell John, I just said, "I ain't seen her for six months, John."

"I seen her this afternoon," he said. "She's in Dunning."

Well, it figured. Anybody gets to be an alcoholic like that, they wind up in the nut-house.

"She just sits there staring at the wall," he said. "The doc tells me she ain't said a word to nobody for three weeks. Not a word. And she didn't even know me, Eddie. I'm going to kill that son. I'm going to kill him slow. Real slow."

But I could see he was easing up. He didn't go into details. He didn't curse it out, like he had at first. I gave him a little of the crap the cops always dish out. I said, "It won't do you no good, John, because you won't live long enough. And it won't do her no good either. Besides, you ain't the killer type, John. You and me, we ain't the killer type."

He grabbed me by the throat and he said, "You ain't talking me out of nothing, Eddie. Get moving."

See, he was weakening. How about that drink now, Mac? Hey, bartender! Over here, you jackass!

In we went, upstairs, no sign of Pops or Big Louie or nobody until we walk into the office. They were waiting there, like I figured they would be. Pops, Big Louie, Lefty.

They clobbered John soon as he walked in. They took his rod away. They pushed him into a chair and Pops stood over him, ready to clobber him again.

"Well," said Lefty, "if it ain't Nervous John. I heard you're gunning for me, John."

He didn't say nothing. He just sat there glaring at me, then glaring at Lefty.

"I hear I'm going to die slow, John," Lefty said.

This John, he started to curse then. In a low voice, all kinds of curses. He sat there and called Lefty every nasty name he ever heard all his life.

People didn't talk to Lefty that way. Not Lefty. He got red in the face and he said, "Shut up!"

John kept right on cursing and Pops gave him the back of his hand in the teeth. John shut up then, all right. You know how Pops was with that backhand.

He just sat there, John did, glaring at Lefty, the hate in him so hard he was shaking.

That's when I found out what kind of a double-crosser Lefty was.

He said to me, "Okay, Eddie, he's all yours."

Can you imagine that? The character coming around gunning for Lefty, and me making a neat package out of him, and Lefty saying, "He's all yours, Eddie."

What a cotton-picking, chicken-stealing, double-crossing son he turned out to be.

I said, "Whadda you mean he's all mine? He's got a slug for you, Lefty, not for me."

Lefty said, "So he heard it wrong. That ain't my fault."

Can you beat it? After me setting it up for him. I told him so. I said, "After me setting it up for you. The tape recorder and all."

"Look," Lefty said, "I don't like nobody gunning for me. It's bad for business. But that don't mean I go around cleaning up somebody else's mess. He's your headache, Eddie, not mine. I never touched his babe."

The double-crossing son.

That's when I lit out, Mac, see? Soon as I found out what kind of a character this Lefty really was.

Nervous John, he made a break for me, but Pops sat him down again with one to the teeth and one to the gut. That was when Lefty said, "He's all yours, Eddie," and then he and Pops and Big Louie they took off.

And me, I did, too—while Nervous John was still out. What was I gonna do, throttle him with my bare hands? I never packed an iron in my life.

I had a couple bills in my pocket, half a G in my desk, and I grabbed it and took off. Got me another job dealing out on the Coast. That's how it happened, Mac. That's how come I left town. So you been noticing, eh, Mac? How about a drink? Hey, bartender! Noticing how I watch the door.

All right, so it wasn't him. So it didn't even look like him much. So I didn't have to hit the floor.

There. That's better. Thanks. Thanks for the drink, Mac.

Guess I ought to break the habit, sitting where I can watch the door. I tried. But I don't feel right if I'm anywhere else. That's how come I quit the cards, Mac. Right after I first got out to the Coast I picked up this habit, watching the door. It got so I couldn't even read the cards any more, Mac. My back felt a mile wide. But sitting this way . . . well, I quit flat. You can see why, can't you? Mac, you ain't got an extra sawbuck have you? I'm flat. I'd like to go back to my cards, but . . .

Thanks, Mac, thanks. And thanks for the drinks, too. It's good to see somebody from the old town.

It takes only a few minutes to execute a man. Unless he has the right kind of lawyer . . .

Good-by, World

BY JACK RITCHIE

EDWARDS SAT on the bunk with his knees close together and sweat glossed the backs of his hands. His eyes were big with long-time fear as he watched me read.

I went through the papers slowly, turning each sheet face down after I finished it. I spent thirty seconds on the last one and then I turned it over too.

I shrugged my shoulders slightly and lit a cigarette. "I guess you've had it," I said. "There's nothing else left."

He leaned forward. "No, Mr.

Hudson. You can try once more. You've got to."

I flipped the burnt match through the bars of the cell into the corridor. "Why not face it. I've done everything that can be done."

Edwards' voice trembled. "Try the governor again. He can stop it."

"He has," I said. "Four times so far."

His head moved in spasmodic jerks. "The Supreme Court again, Mr. Hudson. Please."

"It wouldn't do any good," I said. "Even if we had the time. I've had them refuse to review it twice."

Edwards' knuckles went to his lips. "Justice Barton," he said. "He's in this state now on vacation. He could stop it."

"Maybe," I said. "For a little while."

He got to his feet and he had to lean against the wall. "He's got a cabin near Harville. He's an important man. A big man. The people there would know where it is."

I dropped my cigarette and ground it with my foot. "What am I supposed to show him? I've run through every piddling little irregularity and they're not enough to get you a new trial."

His voice was sharp with panic. "I've got just five hours left, Mr. Hudson."

I glanced at my watch. "Four hours and forty-six minutes."

I put the papers back into my briefcase and then I stood there thinking and rocking slightly on my heels. "All right," I said, after a while. "I'll try to get to Justice Barton."

He tried to clasp my hand, but I shoved him aside and rapped on the bars.

The guard came and led the way back up the corridor. "The warden wants to see you for a minute," he said.

We went through the gates of the death house and into the sunshine outside.

The guard glanced at me, interest and coldness mingled in his eyes. "What do you do it for?" he asked. "If anybody deserves to die, Edwards sure as hell does."

"I'm a lawyer," I said. "I owe it to my client to try every means at my disposal."

"That sounds real nice, Mr. Hudson. Do you ever dream about the Jeffers kid he butchered?"

We went up the stairs of the administration building.

Warden Hall was waiting in his anteroom. He worked on his cigar with his lips when he saw me. "Did you say your last good-by to Edwards?"

"I don't know," I said. "I may see him again."

He took the cigar out of his mouth. "Do you expect to get a big reputation out of this?"

"I've got a reputation," I said.

"Then it's money."

"I'm not making a fortune from

Edwards, if that's what you mean."

He moved to his office door. "Come into the office." He looked at the guard. "You better come along too, Jim."

We went inside and Mr. Jeffers was standing at the window looking out.

Jeffers turned and his mouth opened slightly when he saw me. He looked at the Warden and then at me again and there was silence.

"If anything happens to me, Warden," I said clearly. "I'll hold you responsible."

Jeffers met my eyes and he licked his lips. Then he nodded, as if to himself, and started walking toward me.

"I'll kill him," Jeffers said. "I'll kill the dirty shyster."

The guard and the Warden moved forward and forced Jeffers into a leather easy chair.

"Easy now, Mr. Jeffers," the Warden said. "I know just how you feel."

Jeffers struggled for a few moments and then became quiet. "All right, Warden," he said. "I promise I won't do anything."

I looked at Hall. "This is why you wanted to see me? You wanted a face to face meeting with the bereaved father and perhaps a few dramatics? Was I supposed to burst into tears of contrition?"

Hall reddened. "You know what I'd like to do, Hudson? I'd like to leave you alone in this room with him. Just for ten minutes."

I thought about it and smiled.

Hall came close to me. "You got a kid about the age of the Jeffers girl. Suppose it had happened to her?"

I didn't say anything.

"Edwards isn't innocent," Hall said. "There's not a chance of it. You know that and I know that."

"Yes," I said. "We know that."

Hall walked away from me and then turned. "Maybe you think he shouldn't die for it? Is that it?"

"No," I said. "He ought to die."

"You've got no use for him yourself and yet you've been trying every trick in the book to keep him from the gas chamber. You've dragged this out for three years."

I regarded him for a moment. "I think I'll be going," I said.

Hall looked at me curiously. "You got some place important to go?"

"Yes," I said. "One more try."

Jeffers' eyes met mine.

"One more," I said. "I'm going to see Justice Barton." I turned to Hall. "You might get a phone call."

I drove back to the city and had a meal before I began the trip to Harville.

I got there at about six-thirty and dropped in at the office of the small weekly to ask about Justice Barton.

I had several cups of coffee and some sandwiches at a small restaurant and then I drove out of Harville. I followed the rutted mountain road for three miles until I came to the turn-off.

It was dusk when I parked my car in front of the cabin and went to the door.

Justice Barton was a small sere man in a plaid wool shirt and he looked at the briefcase under my arm.

"Richard Hudson," I said.

He nodded and smiled thinly. "I almost expected it. I almost made a bet with myself that you would think of this."

He stood in the doorway for half a minute, examining me, and then he turned and walked back into the cabin.

I followed him and we sat down at the table where a gasoline lantern hissed its bright light.

He looked at his watch. "It's almost seven-thirty. Edwards is supposed to die at eight, isn't he?"

"Yes," I said.

He rubbed the side of his seamed face slowly and stared at me. "You waited until the last minute."

"I didn't think of this," I said. "Edwards did."

His eyes moved to the briefcase.

"It will take at least an hour to go through it," I said.

He smiled tiredly. "New evidence? Prejudiced witnesses? Irregularities?"

I shook my head. "Nothing new, but this is his last chance. It's an hour of your time. Just one hour."

Our eyes met for awhile and then he got up. "I don't have a phone here," he said. "We'll have to go to Harville."

We stopped at a cafe in town and Barton went to the telephone.

I glanced up at the electric wall clock and it was seven-fifty. I ordered two cups of coffee and opened the briefcase.

When Barton came back, he sat down wearily. "I called," he said. "And now they're waiting."

He took a pair of glasses out of his shirt pocket and cleaned them with a handkerchief. He looked at the stack of papers and then began to read.

It was almost nine o'clock when he finished. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "There's nothing here," he said slowly. "Nothing at all to stop it."

I picked up the papers, tamped them into eveness, and slipped them back into the briefcase. I snapped the lock and ordered two more cups of coffee.

Barton stared at his coffee for a minute or two and then he got up. He went to the cashier for change and walked into the phone booth.

I got back to the city at about midnight and drove to the Raven Bar on the west side.

Jeffers was alone in a rear booth and I sat down in front of him.

He smiled at his bottle of beer. "They had to carry him," he said softly. He put his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. "He was that close. That close and then they stopped and waited."

"It was the first phone call from Barton," I said.

He nodded and kept smiling. "It was just right. I liked it. I liked watching him wait to die."

Jeffers tilted the bottle to his lips and then wiped away foam. "And Lord how he screamed when they dragged him off the bench and went on with it an hour later."

The waitress brought my drink and we waited until she was gone.

Jeffers leaned forward and touched my arm. "He stopped screaming when they closed the door." He nodded his head and laughed. "Then he tried to hold his breath."

Jeffers was quiet for a while, thinking about it. "A thousand deaths," he said softly. "That's what I wanted for him."

"That's what you got," I said.

His hands gripped the bottle. "It makes up for what he did to my little girl, doesn't it, Mr. Hudson?"

"Yes," I said.

His eyes stared into mine. "I would have killed you if he got off, Mr. Hudson."

"There wasn't a chance of it," I said. "I told you that."

Jeffers put his hand in the pocket of his coat and brought out the brown paper wrapped package. "You did a good job, Mr. Hudson. You drew it out for three years and the last part was the best of all."

I tore open a corner of the package to make sure the money was there, and then I put it in my pocket.

Jeffers looked up as I got to my feet. "Mr. Hudson," he asked. "They always need witnesses for executions, don't they?"

"Yes," I said.

His eyes were bright. "Can anybody get to be a witness? Can I watch again?"

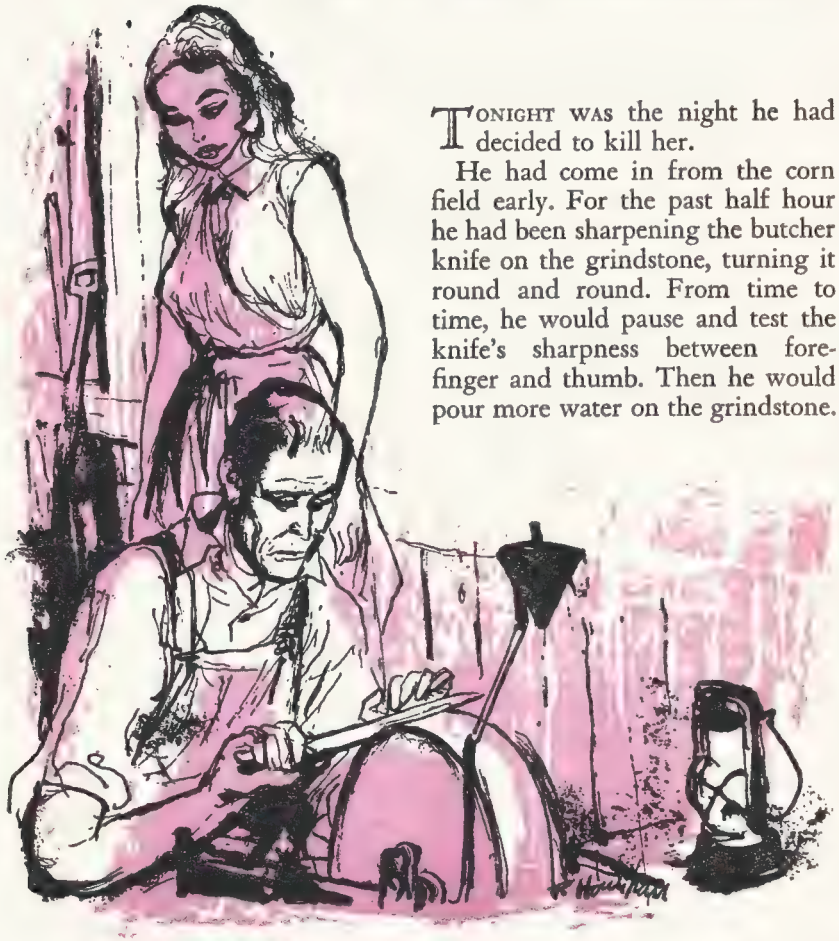
"I don't know," I said. "Why don't you ask."

I left him smiling to himself.

The Earrings

BY KERMIT SHELBY

Always dangling, they were, like a promise. Luke's eyes followed them, and her, hungrily . . .



TONIGHT WAS the night he had decided to kill her.

He had come in from the corn field early. For the past half hour he had been sharpening the butcher knife on the grindstone, turning it round and round. From time to time, he would pause and test the knife's sharpness between forefinger and thumb. Then he would pour more water on the grindstone.

When she came to call him to supper, the knife was ground down to a thin shining sliver. The setting sun fell across it. The fire-red glints blinded her. The same fire-red gleamed in the roots of her gold-red hair. It looked like banked fire hiding there as she tossed her head, jangling the crescent-moon gold earrings in her pierced ears, making the little gold star beneath it bobble.

"What you doing with my good butcher knife?" she asked, looking at the knife uneasily.

He turned the grindstone another round. He puckered his lips, shifting the chew of tobacco, and let go with a mouth full of tobacco juice at a young bird dog sniffing at his heels. He hit it squarely in the eye. The pup tucked its tail between its legs and ran down the path, yelping, toward the shanty a short distance down the sandy road.

"That'll learn you." He laughed with satisfaction.

She gave him a studied look of veiled hatred. "It don't know you give it away," she said indignantly. "It was born here. Lived here—till you shot its poor ma for having pups."

"I ort to killed it along with the rest of the litter," he grunted. "Crazy fool dogs multiplying like rabbits. I'm gonna tell Dave if he don't want that pup killed he'd better tie him up." He wiped the knife on his overall leg. Her eyes went back to it.

"I said what you doing with my good butcher knife?"

He didn't answer for a long moment. Then he said, "Sharpenin' it."

The evening meal that night was more silent than usual. Eating preoccupied him fully. He ate with his legs wide apart, with both elbows on the table, as if bracing himself. He wolfed his food with gustatory liquid sounds.

She stared at her plate, eating scarcely at all.

"What's a matter?" he demanded. "You been hoeing in your garden too much?"

"I'm not hungry." She fiddled with the coffee pot.

"Maybe you in a family way?" He grinned, slyly hopeful.

"You're bragging," she said. Her lips curled.

They had been married not quite six months. It hadn't worked out. Both of them knew this now.

He arose, wiping away buttermilk with the back of his hand, and went toward the nail which held his old felt hat. To her look of inquiry, he said, "Got to fix that gray mare's harness."

She tossed her head in an uncaring manner.

He came toward her. "Them earrings," he said.

"What about my earrings?" She lifted one hand, protectively, as if to stay his approach.

He stood leering down at her, but did not touch her. "Always

danglin'," he said. "Like a promise." He walked toward the barn, calling over his shoulder, "Like a promise with nothin' back of it." He laughed cynically.

She turned her back swiftly. The five-pointed star swung resentfully on its tiny gold chain. In the lamplight her golden-red hair gleamed like banked fire. She cleared the table.

Sunset smeared the sky with evening colors, lighting up the butcher knife as Luke reached the grindstone. The knife was really sharp enough now. He was stalling for time.

His eyes followed hungrily as she came from the house, ignoring him. She picked up a hoe from the fence and walked leisurely toward the vegetable garden at the edge of the corn field, perhaps a hundred yards away. The expectancy in her movements was a challenge and a torment to him because he knew now the expectancy was for somebody else.

The pup had come back. When Luke saw it sneaking past the corner of the barn, he threw rocks at it till it turned tail and ran off into a thicket of high jimson weeds. "Maybe I ort to slit its throat with this butcher knife," he thought. But it was too hot to chase a pup. And Luke had other things on his mind.

He stood in the shadow of the barn, out of sight, watching the blue dress as she chopped rhythmically in the vegetable garden. Once she glanced back toward the house. Luke flattened himself against the side of the barn. She looked toward the shanty where the pup lived, across the corn field. Her attitude was one of listening.

When a bob-white sound came from the corn field, she dropped the hoe and ran toward it. Luke's fingers gripped tighter on the knife. He waited until the long dark blades of the corn hid the blue dot of her dress in the twilight, before he started walking toward the vegetable garden. He did not hurry. His step was slow, deliberate, like a blind man walking. He had forgotten the pup entirely. It came out of the jimson weeds and followed, slinkingly. As Luke walked, the butcher knife caught the last fading red of the sunset. Its glitter fascinated the pup.

Even after Luke reached the black-green opening of the corn row where she had disappeared, he waited longer. Dark was deepening the dusk as his shoulders parted the corn blades. They closed behind him like black water. The pup watched cautiously.

There was movement in the corn field. The tassled tops showered pollen like a rainstorm. And then it was as if a whirlwind struck. Violent agitation seized the corn stalks. Some of them went down, leaving a hole in the darkness. Now only a few tassels quivered. The last bits of pollen drifted, soft as snowflakes. The corn field was

quiet. No breeze moved the long blades. They stood as if painted.

Then the corn blades parted.

Luke dragged their bodies on the old quilt. The load was heavy, but by knotting the corners of the quilt he was able to drag it to a cleared space.

He went to work methodically with the shovel. It made gritty sounds as he dug in the sand. He dumped the two bodies into the hole together with his blood-soaked clothes and shoes and the knife and quilt. He covered them over, leaving the surface flat. The left-over dirt he scattered carefully.

The place looked like he wanted it to look, like any man's place looked who had been cleaning up his fence rows.

Luke walked to the quiet house, naked, and washed all the blood off. As he moved about the kitchen he could hear the clock tick noisily. Without bothering to turn off the light, he climbed into bed.

Then he saw her dresses, hanging there in a row at the foot of the bed. Empty, they looked.

When he closed his eyes, he could still hear her voice, pleading there in the corn field, before he'd slashed at her with the knife, "Luke, don't! For God's sake—don't . . . !"

But they needed killing, he told himself. They'd been asking for it. It started that day he gave Dave Lynn the pup. When Dave took the pup from her, and their hands touched, that's when he had lost her. When Dave stood there looking down at her earrings bobbling, and that sort of look passed between them.

"You might as well take it," she had said. "Luke's going to shoot the rest of the litter. Luke can't stand dogs."

Luke knew no one would ever look for their bodies when he told the neighbors how Dave Lynn had run off with his wife.

After about two weeks he could get Mamie Stover to come keep house for him. Mamie had big legs. She wasn't stand-offish. Mamie had liked him a lot before he got married to Red.

Outside all was quiet. A late breeze had sprung up. The rising moon covered everything with its greenish silver.

In the green-black opening between the corn rows, where the corn had been trampled down, the corn blades rustled softly in the night wind. Now and then a blade would brush harshly against its neighbor. When it did, it made a dry rasping sound, like the rattle of dry paper.

Across the sandy road in the shade of the shanty, in the scratched-out hole of the mulberry tree, the pup lay sleeping fitfully. It had gone home after all because that was where its feeding pan was. And because Dave's wife was the one who always fed it.

Inside the shanty, Dave's wife

stirred restlessly, wondering what could be keeping Dave? Two hours now since he had gone to borrow the monkey wrench from a neighbor.

On the back doorstep, where she would see it the moment she opened the door, lay something the pup had dragged in from the corn field. Beside the old bone it had dragged in yesterday, near the old shoe it had found last week, lay this new object.

The object was a human ear, a feminine ear. Fastened in its pierced lobe was a gold half-crescent earring, a five-pointed star dangling from its tiny chain. And in the tufted skin above it, like a badge of identity, flauntingly-gleamed a dozen or more long strands of red-gold hair.

The Playboy

BY CLAUDIUS RAYE

A lady's man has to be careful. Buddy found himself on the floor; a redhead screaming, "Kill him, kill him!"

She was real close—giggling in his ear and it tickled. But he didn't mind. She was a real doll. For him, she couldn't get close enough.

They laughed rather shyly, for they had only met a few moments before, and held hands beneath the table. Around them, other couples whispered and giggled, somewhat concealed by the drifting clouds of cigarette smoke. No one noticed them sitting in the rear corner booth of the dimly lit bar.

Buddy squeezed her hand and she squeezed back. He was pleased. Shaken with the nearness of her, he leaned back against the smooth

padding of the seat as he tried to get his breath back. He kicked one foot up onto the seat on the other side of the enameled table.

"You're it," he said.

She flashed a brief, but warm smile at him before asking, "It what?"

"The *it*. You know. The *once in a life-time* sort of thing."

"Not me," she said and shook her head as if she didn't believe him.

"Sure," replied Buddy, moving nearer so she could understand him better. "You. No other. I knew it the very minute I sat down near you on the stool at the bar and you gave me the eye in the green-tinted mirror on the other side."

She playfully put one hand on his chest, as if to push him away. She didn't push very hard. "I did not give you the eye in the mirror!" she protested. "You gave me the eye!"

"See! What'd I tell you? Must be fate. We don't even know who picked the other up!"

"Just so it wasn't me," she said. "A girl must uphold her reputation these days. Men never try to help her any."

They both laughed at that. "Anyway," Buddy said, "I wouldn't offer too much help." He let go of her hand and tweaked her under the chin with his fore finger. "But you, you're different. When I saw your reflection, I knew I had to meet you someway. You looked so pretty in that green mirror that my heart quit beating and I had to pinch myself to see if I was dreaming."

She wrinkled a cute, turned-up nose at him. "Did I honestly do you that way? Honestly, I mean?"

"Sure. You're real nice."

He had his arm propped on the table. She took his arm and entangled it in hers, clasping his hand tightly. "So you asked if you could buy me a drink and I agreed," she said softly, ". . . though nicely, as would be expected of a lady."

"Uh-huh," agreed Buddy. "Say, I never thought to ask your name. Mine's Buddy Ralls. What's yours?"

"Myreen Castle. Do you like it?"

"Sure. Wonderful name. Just like you."

"Do you really think so?"

"Ain't many girls I'd buy a drink for. Nope, I generally toss them a bottle of beer and that's that. But you? I had to get you the best. Heck! I'd even be willing to get you champagne, but I ain't had a job in a couple of weeks and can't afford it." He jangled some loose coins in his pocket. "Got enough for another martini, if you want."

"Oh, no. One is plenty. It was swell of you to buy me this, considering the fact that you're almost broke."

"Ah, I don't fret none. Oke Kingsley, my boss, will call me in a couple of days. I'll be loaded again."

She pressed nearer, until Buddy thought she was going to go inside

him. He took a strand of her cascading blonde hair and twisted it between his fingers. "Such lovely hair. We could buy some dark blue pillowcases. I could wake up in the morning and see you framed in blue. Blonde in blue. It would be nice, just like heaven."

"Please, Buddy," she said, "I'm not that kind of girl at all. A girl can't just go and do things like that. I couldn't go live with you."

Buddy wasn't convinced. "Why not? What's to keep you from it? Religion? Another guy?"

She shook her head.

"Your parents?"

"No. It's just that I believe in true love and marriage."

"See there! And we've got true love. But haven't you read any of these sex reports? We may not be compatible." He squeezed her hand firmly. "I'll tell you. Let's drive around for a while, huh? Both of us need some real, clear air. We can talk . . . that won't do any harm."

"I don't know . . ."

Buddy smiled warmly at her. He was sure that she was the type who would, but who wanted it to appear like an accident. Women . . .

"Sure you do. Remember? It's fate, us being together. You can't help yourself!"

Her lips puckered sweetly. "Well, I'll go driving with you anyway. I do need that fresh air. But I won't go to your apartment. A girl's got to keep looking for the right guy. She'll know when she finds him and he'll know too—just like that. Least, I believe so."

"Me, too, Myreen. It's love. I already know. But a guy should be careful in choosing a wife. She might not agree with him or something like that." He stood up. "Shall we go?"

His car, a black low-slung Ford, was parked down the street near the entrance of an alley. They walked that far in silence. Buddy opened the door for her, then he went around to the other side and got in.

"You live near here?" he asked.

She nodded her head and said, "Yes. I just moved to the city a week ago."

As he found the key and started the motor, she raised up and doubled her legs beneath her. She looked like a cute little kitten smiling fondly at its master.

"I knew there weren't any dolls like you around before or I would have met them. You're about twenty, aren't you?"

"Am not," she said with mock reproach. "I'm twenty-one."

"A pretty twenty-one."

He drove slowly through the traffic. He knew where he was going. It took a quarter of an hour to reach the harbor.

He parked in a narrow place between two warehouses. She came willingly into his arms. The girls always did.

She jerked away in alarm when

the fog horn of a boat on the river blasted through the night, but he pulled her right back against his chest. He began to whisper in her ear, telling her how wonderful she was, how pretty her eyes were, how lovely her lips were to kiss. But when he started pulling the zipper of her dress, she became panicky.

"No, Buddy! I meant what I said."

"Everything's going to be all right," Buddy assured her, his fingers working swiftly at the dress.

Her sobbing blended with the night sounds coming from the river.

And she was still crying softly much later, huddled in the corner of the seat, while Buddy was smoking a cigarette and feeling proud of himself.

"Honest," he said, trying to soothe her, "I never realized that you were a virgin. I probably wouldn't have done it, had I known."

"What—what are we going to do now?" Myreen sobbed.

"Do?"

"About me?"

"We'll talk about that later—in the morning."

"In the morning?" she questioned. She had ceased crying and was now dabbing at her eyes with a tiny handkerchief.

"Sure. We might as well spend the rest of the night at my apartment. Then we'll talk about things in the morning."

Myreen's eyes began to sparkle. She scooted across the seat and her hands went around his neck. "Oh, Buddy," she murmured and kissed him fervently, "and we can be married and everything will be okay."

Buddy pushed her gently away. He wasn't planning on marriage. "We'll think about it later. Not now. It's too early to tell if we're suited to each other."

"Too early!" exclaimed Myreen. "But I did what you wanted!"

Buddy was calm; he knew how to handle situations like this. He started the motor and backed the car out of the hidden niche. "We'll talk about it in the morning," he said. And for the moment, she seemed to accept that.

"Buddy, dear, you mentioned your job earlier in the evening," Myreen said softly. "Just what do you do for a living? I mean, it isn't really important, but . . ."

"The auto line," answered Buddy. He grinned.

"Darling, be serious."

"You ain't against a guy picking up a little easy dough, are you, Doll?"

She tossed her blonde curls about thoughtfully. "No. I guess not, if no one gets hurt. Do you do something crooked?" she asked. Her tone implied that she detested anything unlawful.

"I don't hurt nobody," he told her. "Shot a cop once." He paused, studying her. "You won't tell?"

She shook her head, one of her

smooth, white hands covering her mouth in an awed, shocked gesture —as if she wasn't sure about him at all.

"I've got it made, see. I transport hot cars for the Kingsley racket. I take them over the state line. Don't have to steal them, someone else does that. My job is safe. But this time, a cop got wise. He chased out after me. His car was souped-up or something. Though I was making one-ten, he kept gaining. So I pulled out my gun . . ."

"A gun!" Myreen interrupted, horrified at the thought.

". . . a gat, a rod, a pusher—whatever you want to call it," Buddy replied harshly. "Yes, a gun. And as the cop drew up near, I popped a couple of slugs his way. Got him, too."

Buddy grinned. It didn't matter about telling her. She was already stuck on him. He could easily tell. They fell easy for his looks and line. Girls ate it up.

"But that damn cop lived," he went on. "The bullet, the wreck and everything didn't kill him. I'd had my hat brim pulled low, so he couldn't identify me, but just to play it safe I had to dump that car in the lake and Kingsley was sure mad. That damned tough cop cost me a hell of a lot of dough."

Myreen was scared, but trying not to show it.

"Shooting a cop . . . that's awfully dangerous and bad," she said weakly.

Buddy scowled at her. "Only time it ever happened," he assured her. "Say! Are you worried about me or about that cop?"

"I think, about you," said Myreen.

Buddy smiled at her. "That's good, Baby. Because you and me, we're it, you know."

That seemed to calm Myreen somewhat. By the time they reached the apartment, she was holding his hand again.

The outside of the building was gray, tainted with the grime of soot and smoke from nearby factories. Inside, the walls were painted white, or had been painted white at one time. Now they were grimed like the outside. Before a door, Buddy stopped and withdrew some keys from his pocket.

"Here we are," he told her.

"Are you sure this is all right?"

"Natch." He unlocked the door and stepped inside. The lights were already on and a voluptuous redhead was curled up cosily on a couch, glaring at them.

"Damn it!" exclaimed Buddy, enraged. "I told you to pack up and move out!"

The redhead slithered off the couch and came toward him. She gave Myreen a dirty look and tried to put her arms around Buddy, but he pushed her away. Myreen was leaning against the closed door, trembling, as from freezing cold.

"Please, Honey," the redhead pleaded. "I love you. I don't want to move out. I have no place to go!"

"Move it, Jo! I can't stand your gaff."

The redhead and Buddy were now facing each other.

Jo said, "Buddy," real soft, trying to beg him. He lashed her across the face with the palm of his hand. He hit her so hard that she fell to the floor. She sat there, staring up at him bitterly, tears flowing from her eyes. She started moaning and holding her bruised cheek.

Myreen let out a horrified gasp.

"Git, Jo!" commanded Buddy, but the redhead didn't move. He began to steam with rage, his mouth twisting into a thin, crooked scar. He kicked Jo on the thigh, where the dress had fallen away to expose the edge of sheer silk stockings.

Jo was sobbing freely now. Buddy kicked her in the ribs this time. When she started to scream, he clasped a large, rough hand over her mouth. "You got to mind me, bitch. Got to move when I say move. Got to learn." He lifted her up by the front of her dress and struck her jaw with his fist.

She was still conscious, so he kept hitting her until his right hand became too tired to lift. He changed hands and continued to slug her, alternating between her face and her body.

Myreen yelled "Stop!" but Buddy didn't hear her, for he was so engrossed in beating up the redhead.

Suddenly, Buddy blacked-out. When he came to, he was down on the floor in some of his own puke. Myreen was standing over him with a table lamp in her hand.

He mumbled curses and started to get up, but she motioned threateningly with the lamp and he changed his mind. His head was hurting like hell. He felt for the bump and found it.

"Kill him, kill him!" a voice was screaming. Buddy turned his head to the side and saw Jo who was doing the screaming. Her face was bloody and swollen from the beating he'd given her. Once shining and red, her hair now looked like a wrung out mop. She was trying to get up, but kept falling back. Finally, she quit trying and began to crawl toward him—slowly.

"What's this, Doll?" Buddy asked Myreen.

"You were beating her to death," she answered, making a flat, cold statement of it.

"Huh!" mumbled Buddy. He started to get to his feet again.

"Don't move," warned Myreen. Her mouth was twisted and he knew she meant it. Jo was still groaning and slowly making her way to him. She was only four feet away now.

"How many, Buddy?" asked Myreen.

"Many what?" His head was hurting something terrible.

"How many girls have you had and tossed out when you found something new?"

He rubbed at the bump on his head. "What difference does it

make? You're the only one that counts, Doll."

Jo stopped moving and laughed harshly. "Did he tell you he only bought beer for other girls, but you deserved champagne. He even bought me champagne." She laughed some more, but it seemed to hurt her so she stopped. "I'm going to kill him," she said, her voice a high-pitched whine.

Myreen swung the lamp up over her head. It was solid metal.

"No," she said. "I am."

—Continued from back cover

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